

THE COMMUNICATING VILLAGE:  
HUMPHREY JENNINGS AND SURREALISM

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the films of Humphrey Jennings, exploring his work in relation to surrealism. This examination provides an overview of how surrealism's set of ideas is manifest in Jennings's documentary film work. The thesis does not assert that his films are surrealist texts or that there is such a thing as a surrealist film; rather it explores how his films, produced in Britain in the period from 1936 to 1950, have a dialectical relationship with surrealism.

The thesis first considers Jennings's work in relation to documentary theory, outlining how and why he is considered a significant filmmaker in the documentary field. It then goes on to consider Jennings's engagement with surrealism in Britain in the years prior to World War Two. The thesis identifies three paradoxes relating to surrealism in Britain, using these to explore surrealism as an aura that can be read in the films of Jennings.

The thesis explores three active phases of Jennings's film work, each phase culminating in a key film. It acknowledges that *Spare Time* (1939) and *Listen to Britain* (1942) are key films in Jennings's oeuvre, examining these two films and then emphasising the importance of a third, previously generally overlooked, film, *The Silent Village* (1943). These explorations allow an examination of the way that Jennings's films articulate the relationship between surrealism and the everyday, the sublime and the uncanny. The thesis asserts that there is a specifically British form of surrealism that has developed from the historical

situation of Britain in the period from 1936 to 1946, one that draws from the national identity of Britain. The symbolic domain of British surrealism and its praxis can read in the films of Jennings and the auratic traces of Jennings's films thread through the work of subsequent filmmakers. This thesis describes these traces as the communicating village. The thesis's consideration of Jennings's films in relation to surrealism offers a means by which to examine the work of subsequent filmmakers and to assess the importance of surrealism to British cinema.

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## Introduction

They contain in little a whole world– they are the knots in a great net of tangled time and space – the moments at which the situation of humanity is clear. (Jennings, 1985, p. xxxv)

Over the course of a brief filmmaking career that lasted from 1934 to 1950, Humphrey Jennings directed thirty documentary films. The longest of his films is eighty minutes but the average length of a Jennings film is closer to twenty minutes. Despite his relatively small cinematic output, Jennings's work has become highly influential and also emblematic of British national unity. Jennings has been written about from a range of perspectives: Kevin Jackson's biography, *Humphrey Jennings* (2004) along with his research into and publication of Jennings's writings on film, *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* (Jackson, 1993), have given us a solid overview of Jennings from a historical perspective. Philip Logan has developed this work in his systematic examination of Jennings's life and career, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: a Re-assessment* (2011). Keith Beattie's *Humphrey Jennings* (2010) examines Jennings's innovative approach to filmmaking, exploring how Jennings's techniques of collage and symphonic ambiguity are relevant to British cinema and national identity.

This thesis builds on the work of these authors, and the others who have written on Jennings, by exploring the specific relationship between Jennings as a surrealist and filmmaker working in Britain in the first half of the Twentieth

Century. The aims of this thesis are to read the films of Humphrey Jennings in relation to surrealism and to explore how surrealism can be seen to have informed all of Jennings films. The thesis does not assert that his films are surreal texts, it does however explore how his films can be effectively read through surrealist practice and examines how his films relate to broader surrealist ideas.

The international surrealist movement concerns itself with a revolutionary attempt to reconfigure the world through the breaking down of boundaries between different states of existence such as the conscious and the unconscious or dream and reality. This revolutionary purpose was communicated by Breton in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) and has been re-articulated by surrealists in their writings and art up to the present day. As Jennings's work may not appear immediately revolutionary, this thesis explores whether the effective longevity and influence of Jennings's films is related to his engagement with the surrealist movement and attempts to articulate how this relationship is figured in his work.

As Jennings is best known as a key figure in the history of the British documentary film movement, the first chapter of this thesis positions Jennings in relation to writing on documentary film history and the development of documentary theory. The chapter explores how writers on documentary have responded to the work of Jennings and how this response has developed over time. It considers the relationship between documentary and the avant-garde in order to begin to draw parallels between documentary and surrealism that are developed in

subsequent chapters. It concludes with the argument that Jennings remains a key figure in relation to the history of documentary.

The second chapter examines surrealism in Britain and Humphrey Jennings's relationship to the movement. It starts by attempting a definition of surrealism in relation to three paradoxes: firstly, that surrealism is placeless and timeless yet born in a specific place and time; secondly, that surrealism is an international movement with distinct national identities; thirdly, that surrealism explores individual freedom through collaborative work and the abdication of the individual. The chapter progresses to explore the development of surrealism in Britain and considers Jennings's films in relation to the three paradoxes.

The third and most substantial chapter of the thesis consists of detailed descriptions and analyses of all of Jennings's films in relation to surrealist ideas. It identifies three key periods of work by Jennings and the films that best represent the approaches applied in these periods. The three films considered in detail are *Spare Time* (1939) in relation to surrealism and the everyday, *Listen to Britain* (1942) in relation to the surrealist sublime and *The Silent Village* (1943) in relation to surrealism and the uncanny. The thesis concludes with an assessment of the relationship between Jennings's films and surrealism and suggests areas for further investigation.



## Chapter 1: Humphrey Jennings and Documentary.

As Humphrey Jennings is a key figure in the history of documentary filmmaking, this chapter explores his work in the context of documentary theory and maps how the interpretations of Jennings's work have changed as the production of and critical responses to documentary film have developed. The chapter examines the development of critical histories of documentary from 1926 when the term was first used and how it has evolved into Bill Nichols's articulation of six documentary modes (Nichols 2001). The chapter then explores how writers on documentary have responded to the work of Jennings and how this response has developed over time. It concludes with the argument that Jennings remains a key figure in relation to both the history of documentary and to contemporary film production.

### The Definitions of Documentary.

John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement is credited with the first use of the term in his review (Grierson 1926) of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926). He subsequently defined documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1946, p. 11) and this relationship between ideology, practice and a pre-existing reality is at the heart of continued attempts to explore and define documentary filmmaking. From 1926 until the present day, developments in documentary practice and theory have evolved in response to technical and cultural transformations, leading writers on the subject to explore the conventions of the documentary as if it were a genre. This chapter explores Humphrey

Jennings's relationship to the genre and is therefore chiefly concerned with documentary film rather than work produced for television, which has become the main site of exhibition for contemporary documentary production.

Grierson outlined his conception of the documentary genre in his essay "First Principles of Documentary" (Grierson 1946, pp. 78 - 89), which was written between 1932 and 1934 (Corner 1996, p. 11). In this essay, Grierson acknowledges that documentary is a "clumsy description" (Grierson 1946, p. 78) and attempts to distinguish documentary from other "films made from natural materials" (ibid.) such as newsreels, travelogues and lecture films. For Grierson the documentary offers an opportunity to open up the cinema screen to the real world, "Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story," and in doing so, there is "*also* an opportunity to perform creative work" (Grierson, 1946, p. 80). In his essay Grierson explores the range of documentary types concluding that Flaherty's ethnographic technique is the best illustration of his first principles of documentary. Flaherty's technique involves living with his subject for some time before producing a creative interpretation of the observed reality. Grierson notes that although Flaherty "masters" and "come(s) into intimacy" (Grierson 1946, p. 81) with his subject, he relies on an artificially constructed story form. This technique necessitates substantial elements of directed and reconstructed action to structure the filmed actuality. Grierson's alternative illustration of documentary technique is the city symphony film as exemplified by Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt*, 1927), a film that for Grierson symbolises the "break

away from the story borrowed from literature, and from the play borrowed from the stage” (Grierson 1946, p. 82). He sees this type of documentary as an alternative to the exotic locations and ethnographic studies of Flaherty. Concentrating instead on formal issues and dealing with prosaic material, he argues that the city symphony “represented, slimly, the return from romance to reality” (Grierson 1946, p. 82). Grierson asserts that the focus on formal concerns in these films leads to an avoidance of political issues and is therefore of less interest to his conception of the documentary genre. He develops this point to suggest that a poetic approach to documentary production “might have taken our consideration of documentary a step further” (Grierson 1946, p. 85) but he bemoans the fact that “no great imagist film has arrived to give character to the advance.” (Grierson 1946, p. 85). He finds some limited examples of this poetic approach in his own film *Drifters* (1929), the work of Basil Wright and in more experimental films such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Romance Sentimentale* (1930). He summarises his exploration of the range of documentary types by arguing that there are three main techniques for creatively treating actuality.

The distinction is between (a) a musical or non-literary method ; (b) a dramatic method with clashing forces ; and (c) a poetic, contemplative, and altogether literary method. These three methods may all appear in one film, but their proportion depends naturally on the character of the director – and his private hopes of salvation. (Grierson 1946, p. 89)

Grierson’s exploration of documentary types can be considered a precursor of Bill Nichols’s documentary modes, currently the most widely used taxonomy of the form. Although every documentary has its own distinct voice, writers on the

subject have developed taxonomies in order to explore the history and aesthetics of documentary production.

Nichols's taxonomy suggests six modes of representation that he describes as a "loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work" (Nichols 2001, p. 89). These six modes develop from the distinction between direct and indirect address that he outlines in *Ideology and the Image* (Nichols 1981) and which he names "expository" and "observational" cinema (Nichols 1981, p. 182). These two modes of address are subsequently expanded into four categories in *Representing Reality* (Nichols 1991, pp. 32 – 75). In this book the four modes that "stand out as the dominant organizational patterns around which most texts are structured" are "expository, observational, interactive and reflexive." (Nichols 1991, p. 32). Ten years later, Nichols refines his concept to outline "six modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary genre" (Nichols 2001, p. 99). The six modes are: poetic, expository, observational, reflexive, participatory and performative and these are briefly summarised below.

In Nichols's scheme, Poetic documentary shares a common terrain with the modernist avant-garde. Rather than presenting specific locations in time and place through continuity editing, the poetic documentary will explore patterns and associations through temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions. People are not actors with complex personalities; they become one element within a lyrical impression of time and place. Rather than communicate through a straightforward transfer of information, the poetic documentary will stress mood and tone over

argument, persuasion or knowledge. Reality is transmitted as a series of subjective impressions and fragments, reconstructed cinematically as though through the memory of the artist/filmmaker. The poetic mode is fragmented, ambiguous and haunting. This description parallels Grierson's impression of the city symphony films, a mode that Grierson considers a creative dead end.

For all its ado of workmen and factories and swirl and swing of a great city, *Berlin* created nothing. Or rather if it created something, it was that shower of rain in the afternoon... and no other issue of God or man emerged than that sudden besmattering spilling of wet on people and pavements... The little daily doings, however finely symphonised, are not enough. (Grierson 1946, pp. 83 - 84)

In subsequent chapters this thesis explores how the "little daily doings" (Grierson 1946, p. 84) are crucial to an understanding of surrealist cinema and how it is possible to elicit the marvellous from the everyday. It examines how, in the right hands, cinematic symphonies of the prosaic can become more than "enough" (Grierson 1946, p. 84).

Expository documentary is the term given to works that assemble fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than the poetic documentary. The expository mode addresses the viewer directly, using a voice-of-god or voice-of-authority commentary to propose a particular perspective or advance an argument. They rely on the logic of the spoken commentary to frame the argument – the words illustrate the images. This mode of address was the mainstay of much of the British documentary movement with films such as

*Housing Problems* (Elton & Anstey, 1935) using spoken commentary to explore social issues alongside the more innovative use of the *vox pop* technique.

The observational mode can be seen as the realisation, through technical developments, of Flaherty's principles as described by Grierson:

With Flaherty it became an absolute principle that the story must be taken from the location, and that it should be (what he considers) the essential story of the location. (Grierson 1946, p. 81)

By the 1960s new lightweight cameras and tape recorders allowed documentary makers to move freely about, filming a scene and recording synchronised dialogue, filming events as they happened. This technical development, along with post-war political and social concerns, leads to an observational film technique that attempts to avoid staging and poetic composition in favour of observing lived experience spontaneously, as if a fly on the wall, using long shots and avoiding montage techniques. The observational documentary mode, of which the Direct Cinema of Richard Leacock, Donn A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers is the main representative, tends to avoid voice-over commentary and non-diegetic sound. Events are not re-enacted and the filmmaker is not obviously present in the film. The films take on the look of Italian neo-realist fiction films but, as these films are non-fiction, ethical issues, for example their voyeuristic nature, are raised. This leads to a critique of the observational mode by writers and filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, who claims that Leacock's camera, deprived of human agency or consciousness "loses the two

fundamental qualities of a camera: intelligence and sensibility.” (quoted in Winston 1995, p. 159). Winston offers a number of caveats in relation to the claims of veracity offered by the direct cinema filmmakers. He argues that the observational documentary soon becomes open to control by spin-doctors as well as relying on narrative conventions, pointing out that Steve Mamber has identified “the dominant narrative characteristic of these films, a ‘crisis structure’.” (Winston 1995, p. 153).

Nichols’s next category is the reflexive mode which foregrounds the “processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer” (Nichols 2001, p. 125). In the reflexive documentary, the filmmaker speaks about the historical world but also about the problems of representing this world to an audience through the medium of film. A reflexive documentary film will engage with and explore notions of realism and representation, demonstrating artifice through a deconstruction of techniques. The reflexive mode is “self-conscious and self-questioning” (Nichols, 2001 p. 127), it “draws our attention to our assumptions and expectations about documentary form” (Nichols 2001, p. 128) and, by implication, our assumptions and expectations about the historical world. Nichols uses films from different historical periods such as *The Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek S Kinoapparatomto*, Vertov, 1929) and *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988) to illustrate this mode and demonstrate that it does not occupy a fixed historical period.

Nichols distinguishes the participatory mode as a further form of reflexive cinema, with a close relationship to anthropological and social research work. When watching a participatory documentary we “expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with rather than unobtrusively observes, poetically reconfigures, or argumentatively assembles the world. The documentary maker becomes a “social actor” involved in the “ethics and politics of encounter” (Nichols 2001, p. 116). Rouch and Morin, working in France, termed this style of filmmaking *cinéma vérité* in homage to Vertov’s *kino pravda*. In these films it is suggested that there is a truth that exists because of the interaction between the camera and the subject, making the camera and filmmaker an active element of the text.

Performative documentary is closely related to the poetic mode in that it describes films that focus on uncertainty and the complexity of experience “as seen from the perspective of the filmmaker him or herself” (Nichols 2001, p. 131). There is an autobiographical element to the performative documentary in which the author becomes performer.

The referential quality of documentary... yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects, including the filmmaker. (Nichols 2001, p. 132)

There is an attempt by the performative documentary maker to encourage the viewer to feel an affinity for his or her viewpoint whilst simultaneously demonstrating awareness that this view is subjective. Stella Bruzzi points out that



the performative element can arise from the performance of the subject or the filmmaker and is often a “hidden aspect” (Bruzzi 2000, p. 153) of the film.

We can see in the way that Nichols’s notion of the documentary modes has evolved that they are effectively “basic ways of organizing certain texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions” (Nichols 1991, p. 32) and that these categories can change over time. In Nichols’s work, the boundaries of these modes are permeable and, like Grierson’s three methods, more than one of these modes can be applied in the analysis of a single film. Nichols’s taxonomy is probably the most useful current way of exploring and defining documentary but in examining the work of Jennings, we should also consider the historical development of writing on documentary. This is because, as Jennings was working under the interrelated influences of modernism and Grierson, his work is not only of documentary but is also instrumental in the development of documentary theory.

### Documentary Histories

Paul Rotha’s *Documentary Film* (1939) remained the only published detailed overview of the genre until the 1970s. His book is subtitled “The use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality” (Rotha 1952, p. 5) and covers the evolution, principles and practicalities of documentary filmmaking from an international perspective. In 1971, Lewis Jacobs edited a volume of writings on the history of documentary production by a range of authors (Jacobs 1971) that includes work by European

and American writers tracing the development of the genre over time through case studies of key films and directors. In 1972 Lovell and Hillier published *Studies in Documentary* and this is one of the first books to focus on the documentary movement in Britain. Since then, the international history of documentary film has been outlined in a number of key texts; Richard Barsam published his *Nonfiction film: A Critical History* in 1976 with a revised and expanded edition in 1992. Erik Barnouw's *Documentary, a History of the Non-Fiction Film* was published in 1974, revised in 1983 and 1993 and is a comprehensive historical survey of the documentary movement. Barnouw uses a different taxonomy to Nichols, more directly linked to defined historical periods. He starts with the work of "prophets" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 3 - 30) such as Muybridge and Edison, moving on to delineate the chronology of a range of approaches to documentary production using categories such as "explorer" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 33 - 31) to describe Flaherty's work, "reporter" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 51 - 71) in relation to Vertov's films and categorising other movements with terms such as "poet" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 185 - 198) and "guerrilla" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 262 - 293). In Barnouw's conception, Jennings belongs to the "bugler" (Barnouw 1993, pp. 139 - 172) category.

World War II: the bugle-call film, adjunct to military action, weapon of war. The filmmaker's task: as to the faithful, to stir the blood, building determination to the highest pitch; as to the enemy, to chill the marrow, paralyzing the will to resist. (Barnouw 1993, p. 139)

Barnouw admits that Jennings's "style was at odds with connotations of 'war film,' and this was the reason for his impact" (Barnouw 1993, p. 145), his work may have "stirred the blood" (Barnouw 1993, p. 139) but it is difficult to believe it would "chill the marrow" (Barnouw 1993, p. 139) of the enemy.

Bill Nichols's writings also outline the history of the form but focus more on the difficulties of defining documentary film as distinct from fiction film. In his conception of cinema, all films could be considered documentaries, either documentaries of wish-fulfilment (fiction) or documentaries of social representation (non-fiction). Both types of film call on us to interpret or grasp meanings and values and then believe or respond to them. Nichols argues that fiction wants us to suspend disbelief whereas non-fiction wants to instil belief. In films such as *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) that construct a speculative fiction from a real event, Jennings appears to occupy a space between these two poles.

Like Grierson, Nichols sees documentary as a rhetorical device from which we take direction but he also identifies that we take pleasure from the genre. His is a more complex analysis of the documentary and its indexical relationship to the historical world. Documentary represents a world that we might see ourselves – a record of the world that consists of an indexical representation of reality plus a story or argument that represents the ideas of the filmmaker and the interests of others such as the sponsor of the film.

Documentaries, then, offer aural and visual likenesses or representations of some part of the historical world. They stand for or represent the views of individuals, groups and institutions. They also make representations, mount arguments, or formulate persuasive strategies of their own, setting out to persuade us to accept their views as appropriate. (Nichols 2001, p. 5)

Nichols, as Grierson before him, examines the ways in which ethical issues are central to documentary film. He argues that in fiction, there is a contract in which the actors work for the filmmaker and perform for the film, whereas in documentary production the filmmaker has a greater ethical responsibility to consider the effect that the act of filmmaking has on the subject. Ethical conflicts might include “The filmmaker’s desire to make a compelling film” versus the subject’s “desire to have their social rights and personal dignity respected” (Nichols 2001, p. 11). He explores these ethical issues by considering the three-way interaction between the filmmaker, subject and audience (I/Them/You) and how these three positions may be organised in a range of hierarchies such as: “I speak about them to you” (Nichols 2001, p. 13) in which the filmmaker addresses the audience about an observed subject or “we speak about us to you” (Nichols 2001, p. 18) in which the filmmakers partake in a form of auto-ethnography. A film such as *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) may be seen to be organised in this second way when viewed in America during the Second World War, but the hierarchy may be different when viewed contemporaneously in Britain, as the work of an individual auteur or in the present day. There is a contingency in how these interactions are structured and this relationship is

contingent on the shifting dynamics between institutions, practitioners and audiences that becomes the key historiographic element in Nichols's writing.

We can see this at play in the attempts that Rotha and Grierson made to exclude certain types of film (the newsreel, the travelogue and the instructional film) from the category of documentary (Rotha 1936, p. 109) (Grierson 1946, pp. 78 - 89). This is an example of Nichols's fairly self-evident statement that "Documentaries are what the organizations and institutions that produce them make." (Nichols 2001, p. 22). The institution defines the documentary through categorising the film product as a documentary. This reinforces the notion that documentary is a genre with accepted conventions, such as a narrative driven by a problem/solution logic and an engagement with the world where continuity of time and space through editing is less important than a rhetorical position. Nichols has argued that, in documentary films, montage tends to be used rhetorically around a central argument (Nichols 2001, p. 28). Evidentiary editing is used to structure the images around a logical argument and "documentaries rely heavily on the spoken word" (Nichols 2001, p. 30) all of which supports Winston's assertion of the legal roots of the term documentary (Winston 1995, p. 11). Although there may be conventions that link the broad range of films in the documentary corpus, these conventions have a history; they have developed over time and also according to place. Nichols has identified (2001 p. 31) that Europe and Latin America tend to prefer openly rhetorical forms whereas the UK and USA tend to produce more objective, observational films. Jennings's position here is interesting in that his films appear to bridge the divide between the rhetorical and the observational,

between the bugler and the observer. Although his documentary mode may be difficult to pinpoint, his works are clearly connected to the historical period in which he worked.

Nichols has noted that, as viewers, we assume an indexical dimension to documentary film; that the film is a record of things that the film has recorded. In fiction film we “turn our attention to the fabrication of imaginary characters” (Nichols 2001, p. 36) but in documentary we remain focused on the indexical link as first described in detail by Charles Peirce in *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs* (1940). We distinguish between mere documents or records of events (such as a football match) and documentaries as a form. We therefore expect this indexical link whilst remaining aware of the rhetorical nature of the text and the importance of this link might explain the preference for a historical approach in earlier writing on documentary. Although documentary techniques may be used by films of fiction and non-fiction films may use a range of fictional techniques such as reconstruction or scripted, rehearsed dialogue, Nichols argues that the Griersonian documentary and its successors could tackle almost any subject from a supposedly balanced and non-partisan perspective, but “it was also taken for granted that documentaries could talk about anything in the world except themselves.” (Nichols 2001, pp. 23 - 24). With the development of new approaches to documentary such as the reflexive work of Nick Broomfield, this is no longer necessarily true but we can also see the roots of this self-reflexivity in some of Jennings’s later work such as *Family Portrait* (1950), where the voice-over’s conversational style opens with the question “Where to begin?”

It is not just institutions that define the documentary; there is also what Nichols has described as constituencies of practitioners: movements evolve around small groups who are concerned with questioning established forms or practice. These movements become the key markers in the history of documentary, where manifestoes issued by small groups have had an impact on the understanding of documentary and allowed for the re-examination of earlier works. Dziga Vertov's 1922 Manifesto: *WE: Variant of a Manifesto* (Vertov, 1922/1984, pp. 5 - 9) called for a new revolutionary montage of musicality that could sweep away the old films, "WE affirm the future of cinema by denying its present" (Vertov, 1922/1984, p. 7). Lindsay Anderson's tract of 1956, *Stand Up! Stand Up!* (Anderson, 1956/2004) questions the documentary's pursuit of objectivity. By the 1950s, practitioners such as Anderson had become aware that the representation of the working classes by professional, upper middle class documentary makers as victims looking for help from the state and other agencies rather than active agents in their own right was not in any real sense objective. This left it up to the more radical groups such as *Newsreel* in the USA (building on the earlier work of the communist-aligned Workers' Film and Photo Leagues) and anti-imperialist revolutionary groups such as the Latin-American Third Cinema movement to attempt to depict "history from below" (Nichols 2001, p. 152).

In the 1960s documentary makers developed observational and participatory techniques as they attempted to move away from the institutional voice of the

early practitioners that had placed subjects in a historical frame with a problem/solution logic. This move to an observational mode was facilitated by technological developments such as lightweight cameras and synchronised sound, allied to the growth of television as a delivery platform that validated the use of the 16mm film stock that had previously been seen as an amateur technology. As mentioned above, the belief in the objective nature of observational or fly-on-the-wall techniques met with some criticism. By the 1970s, a historical perspective was re-introduced into documentary production but with history told from below rather than above through the use of interviews and archive material. Humphrey Jennings's work relates to these developments, in the way that it moves between positions: between fiction and fact, between observation and comment. It is interesting to note that *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943), a film that allows the social actors to speak with little comment from a contextualising voice-over, is nominally a fiction film whereas his other ostensible documentary work (*Spare Time* [Jennings, 1939] for example) tends to use the "I speak about them to you" (Nichols 2001, p. 13) voice. *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) is different again and can be seen as an example of Nichols's poetic mode, closer to a personal, avant-garde or experimental film, although Nichols describes the film as a performative documentary because it refers back to the historical world for its "ultimate meaning" (Nichols 2001, p. 134).

The development of interest in Jennings's work in the 1970s, as seen in *Studies in Documentary* (Lovell & Hillier, 1972) and the BBC Television Omnibus programme *Heart of Britain* (Vas, 1970) alongside a growing number of articles



and books, may be partly due to the nature of Jennings's films and their relationship to new forms of documentary production but it also relates to a lack of clear cultural direction in British cinema at the time and a renewed attempt to explore the history of British cinema from the perspective of what Lovell calls *The Unknown Cinema of Britain* (Lovell, 1972). In his attempt to identify British art cinema, Lovell concludes "It seems to me that British documentary is our art cinema, our equivalent of German expressionism or French surrealism" (Lovell 1972, p. 2). Using Jennings as the embodiment of the pressures on documentary film production in war time, Lovell argues that the supposed opposition between the propagandists (embodied by Grierson) and the aesthetes (embodied by Jennings) is a simplistic depiction of the British documentary movement. Lovell's description offers a clearer understanding of why Jennings's approach to filmmaking became increasingly important to documentarists and writers on documentary in subsequent years.

The distinction is between a position which sees the cinema as a convenient instrument for expressing known ideas where all the filmmaker has to do is to express the ideas as simply and forcefully as he knows how, and a position which sees the cinema as a way of apprehending ideas and attitudes that are only dimly grasped and in which the attempt to shape and control a film is closely linked with the attempt to apprehend the ideas and attitudes. I think the first position leads to a narrow and ultimately static cinema and the second to a broad dynamic cinema. (Lovell 1972, p. 4)

Brian Winston has further explored this supposed opposition from a more critical perspective, arguing that, although oppositional influences have been identified in

the British documentary movement, this is merely “an attempt to preserve a residual radicalism for some of the films” (Winston 1995, p. 48). He argues that, although the British documentary filmmakers had an interest in Soviet filmmaking, the interest was in formal elements of technique and “there was little of communism on the screen.” (Winston 1995, p. 49). Although Winston sees “no meaningful ideological divide” (Winston 1995, p. 52) in films depicting British industry such as *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti, 1935), Jennings does directly address this divide in *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943), his fictional re-enactment of the Lidice massacre where the miners’ union is depicted as key to the resistance against fascism. Winston, however, is not sympathetic of Jennings being positioned as a poet of the everyday; he discusses *Spare Time* (Jennings, 1939) as being brave in its refusal to ennoble the working man but “the result is that it contains what are easily the movement’s most alienated and alienating images of the working class in the pre-war period.” (Winston 1995, p. 53).

Lovell’s distinction between film as either expression or apprehension raises the question of what Nichols calls, the voice of the documentary, which he defines as, “the specific way in which an argument or perspective is expressed.” (Nichols 2001, p. 43). Nichols’s conception of documentary voice is akin to style – it is “style plus” it reveals “a distinct form of engagement with the historical world.” (Nichols 2001, p. 43). According to Nichols, voices used by the filmmaker may be taken from other forms such as the essay, diary or eulogy and Barnouw uses alternative categories such as reporter or painter. Nichols has argued that whatever the voice, documentary films tend to take from the form of classical rhetorical

thinking or oratory with its five departments of “invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery” (Nichols 2001, p. 49) and its alternation between appeals to evidence and appeals to audience.

The notion of documentary voice can be seen as synonymous with “creative treatment” in Grierson’s formulation of the documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1946, p. 11). Winston takes this formulation to task by asserting that actuality is what distinguishes the documentary film from the fiction film but that “The supposition that any ‘actuality’ is left after ‘creative treatment’ can now be seen as being at best naïve and at worst a mark of duplicity” (Winston 1995, p. 11). Winston’s main criticism of the Griersonian documentary is that “running away from social meaning is what the Griersonian documentary, and therefore the entire tradition, does best.” (Winston 1995, p. 37). He argues that from the time of Flaherty, the documentary artist developed three attitudes that led to a refusal to engage directly with social meaning. These were: a patronising approach to subjects, a relationship to an institutional sponsor and implicit support of the status quo. Winston argues that Grierson may have espoused a radical rhetoric but despite the rhetoric, “Grierson ultimately supported the existing order in everything he did.” (Winston 1995, p. 32). He describes this attitude as a political cowardliness in which the Griersonians refused to explicitly align themselves with a political party or ideology and were happy to move from promoting the British Empire to supporting the British state. Although the majority of the Griersonian documentary enterprise took place under the auspices of a Conservative government, Grierson attempted to position his

films as radical and critical: realism “still had the aura of radicalism” (Winston 1995, p. 35) that allowed the documentary filmmaker to appear radical while remaining “statist”.

In summary, the development of documentary theory can be considered in three phases. Initially practitioners such as Grierson and Rotha wrote on the subject in an attempt to establish and define a new genre in which they had a vested interest. By the 1970s, a historical perspective allowed explorations of the relationships between movements, individuals and institutions by writers such as Barsam and Barnouw. These detailed studies allowed subsequent writers such as Nichols to explore the relationship between the genre, practitioners, institutions, audiences and the historical world. How the work of Humphrey Jennings fits into this broad pattern is explored in the following section.

### Humphrey Jennings and Documentary

Since his death in 1950, Humphrey Jennings has gradually become almost as important to discussion about documentary film making, particularly in Britain, as his one-time mentor and the man who is credited with the definition of the term documentary, John Grierson. Jennings’s reputation was not assured in his lifetime or in the years following his death but there has been a consistent critical campaign to raise the profile of his work over subsequent decades. For many years he was described as a forgotten artist, someone whose work and reputation needed to be saved. As recently as 1995, Philip Simpson suggested that Jennings

is probably remembered “only by those who have a professional interest in documentary cinema” (Simpson 1995, p. 301). Despite this perception his reputation has grown to eclipse that of Grierson and the other British documentary filmmakers. This can be seen in the way that contemporary critics write about Jennings.

Jennings’ symphonic, allusive approach gave documentary its only stylistic advance in a decade of endeavour increasingly marked by the atrophying of the imagination. (Brown 2007, p. 34)

His name, along with those of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, has become synonymous with a certain cinematic vision of Britain that is more about the construction of myths than the creative interpretation of actuality. The slow development of Jennings’s posthumous reputation may, in part, be due to the slow development of Britain’s relationship with European cinema. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith identifies the three outstanding figures in British cinema as “Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Powell and Humphrey Jennings. All three are unquestionably great and unquestionably British” (Nowell-Smith 2004, p. 51). He explores the idea that this was due to the fact that all three had lived in Europe and developed their creative skills there, arguing that British cinema, even at its most British, cannot be separated from its European-ness. This quality of European-ness that Nowell-Smith discusses is closely related to the filmmakers’ engagement with modernist, avant-garde sensibilities. This includes Hitchcock’s early work in Germany where he encountered the expressionism of F.W. Murnau and Jennings’s involvement with the surrealist group in England in the 1930s.

Although key filmmakers of the documentary movement such as Alberto Cavalcanti, Len Lye, Lotte Reiniger and Basil Wright had been involved or influenced by European avant-garde movements, the importance of their influence on the British documentary movement was underplayed by Grierson who claimed to be more interested in film as propaganda than art:

I look on cinema as a pulpit and use it as a propagandist; and this I put unashamedly because in the still unshaven philosophies of cinema, broad distinctions are necessary. Art is one matter, and the wise, as I suggest, has better seek it where there is elbow room for its creation. (Grierson 1946, p. 12)

If Jennings's films parallel those of Hitchcock or Powell and Pressburger, his work stands apart in that he directed relatively few films over a short period of time, films that were not produced for conventional commercial distribution and were, in the main, documentary shorts. Through the 1950s, a general consensus developed that Jennings's best films were produced during the Second World War and that his work was different from other documentary filmmakers in its poetic approach. From this there was drawn an inference that his poetic approach was not as effective or socially valid in peacetime. Rotha describes Jennings's *Diary for Timothy* (1946) as "muddled and uncertain" (Rotha 1952, p. 253) and of his last film, *Family Portrait* (Jennings, 1950) Rotha writes:

in the end the overall impression was blurred. Somehow the specific purpose escaped one; what remained was after all a general impression of mood and atmosphere. (Rotha 1952, p. 254)

We can see in Rotha's comment the desire for a utilitarian purpose in cinema. This desire fits with Roy Armes's assertions in 1978 that the first eighty years of cinema in Britain were "characterised by a greater degree of conservatism than any other contemporary medium of expression" (Armes 1978, p. 333) and that "As a result, there is a striking paucity of stylistic experiment" (Armes 1978, p. 334). Although Jennings's films were admired for their poetic approach, it was not initially evident how they could be fitted into the history of the national cinema. In the programme for Jennings's 1951 Memorial Fund Film Show, Dilys Powell, film critic for the Sunday Times from 1939 to 1976, explored the idea that Jennings's films have no memorable visual compositions but that the "patterns of sound" (Powell 1951, p. 12) are more significant. She describes his visual senses as impressionistic, exploring the notion that in Jennings's films "the communication is always through a multitude of tiny impressions, none in isolation particularly memorable." (Powell 1951, p. 13). She states that "Most of Humphrey Jennings' best-known work was done between 1940 and 1950" (Powell 1951, p. 12), continuing to suggest that his "delicate, individual, humane" (Powell 1951, p. 13) talents may not seem to fit with the ideas of documentary or propaganda but that he was attracted by "the aesthetic potentialities" (Powell 1951, p. 13) of film. In the same programme, Basil Wright, a fellow documentary maker and writer on film, begins to trace a historiographic approach to Jennings's work. In this piece, Wright outlines Jennings's early work from *Pett and Pott* (Cavalcanti 1934) to *Words for Battle* (Jennings 1941) and considers them in relation to Jennings's later masterpieces, suggesting that documentary production

initially interested Jennings as it had “something equivalent to his own wide interests and abilities in so many creative fields.” (Wright 1951, p. 5). Wright believes that it was in *Spring Offensive* (Jennings 1940) that Jennings “finally and triumphantly found himself as a film director” (Wright 1951, p. 11), demonstrating “all the love and understanding of the English scene which he had in him” (Wright 1951, p. 11). Wright finishes his eulogy with a statement that those who believe that “Humphrey’s contribution to British cinema was important both as regards the art of the film and as regards the interpretation of ourselves and our own country, must never disdain a study of his earlier work” (Wright 1951, p. 11).

Immediately following his death, we can see Jennings being positioned as a poet of the cinema, aligned with avant-garde practice as distinct from Griersonian documentary. Paul Rotha was a writer, producer and documentary filmmaker who worked at the Empire Marketing Board (forerunner of the GPO film unit) with Grierson and Wright as well as writing the first English-language history of silent and sound cinema *The Film Till Now* in 1930 (Rotha 1967). He also wrote one of the first comprehensive books on documentary film in 1932. In the third edition of this book (Rotha 1952), he describes Jennings’s prime concern as being with “questions of mood and image and he went after both with intellectual earnestness.” He continues “In another place or another time he might have been passed by as an esoteric dilettante” (Rotha 1952, p. 252). The suggestion here is that Jennings needs the serious subject of the Second World War to make his films significant, and that without the war his films would have been more minor



works. The general approach to Jennings's career as an artist is summarised by Stansky and Abrahams.

Promising in his twenties, in his early thirties still promising, in 1939 he had not yet found a role, an identity, a vocation to which he was totally committed, and he remains a clear-cut instance of an artist brought into being and fulfilment by the war. (Stansky & Abrahams 1994, p. 71)

This image of Jennings as a dilettante and poet placed in opposition to Grierson as a propagandist and reformist educator resulted in Jennings being considered somewhat outside of the documentary movement and contributed to the perception that he was an undervalued artist. It is only through on-going reassessments of the documentary form that his role has come to be seen as pivotal, not only to British Cinema but also as an example of Nichols's poetic mode. The notion that pits Grierson against Jennings as binary opposites also allows the story of documentary to evolve as a narrative:

Humphrey Jennings's classic documentary, *Listen to Britain*, exemplifies the fusion of subjective and objective representation with an overall style that may seem surprisingly modern... it fractures the time and space of its scenes from the visible world of wartime Britain into a large number of dissociated impressions. The result is a poetic form of exposition rather than the observation of life unfolding before a subordinated camera. (Nichols 1991, p. 179)

The difficulty that writers in the 1950s had with identifying Jennings as a documentary filmmaker can be seen not only in Grierson's writing but also in

earlier taxonomies of film such as the one that structures Paul Rotha's populist pictorial overview of the first forty years of cinema *Movie Parade* (Rotha 1936). The book's organisation gives an indication of his approach to the critical classification of film, divided as it is into three major sections: Films of Fiction (subdivided into the popular genres of adventure and melodrama, comedy, romance, historical and chronicle, fantasy, drama and epic), Films of Fact (subdivided into news-reel, record and magazine films, travel films, instructional films and documentary) and Avant-Garde and Trick Films (delineated as two separate categories). Rotha sees little future for avant-garde cinema since the coming of sound and, in his assertion that - "The amusing and often valuable work carried out in France by the *avant-garde* in silent days has no equivalent in sound. To some extent, the place of the *avant-garde* has been taken by the documentary movement." (Rotha 1936, p. x) - we can see him attempting to position the British documentary movement as the inheritor of avant-garde ideals. Rotha's introduction to the section on documentary film uses a still from *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 1922) and rearticulates Grierson's definition of the documentary as films that dramatise fact.

[D]ocumentary as a class of film has been used loosely to describe anything from news-reel to travel pictures. Only recently has the word again been restricted to films dramatising fact, thus permitting other kinds of realist films to fall into their proper places in the instructional, advertising, news and travel classifications. (Rotha 1936, p. 123)

There is an implication in Rotha's brief piece on documentary that the movement has a seriousness of purpose lacking in the work of the avant-garde. It has been

noted that Rotha was obsessed with attempting to categorise forms of cinema, leading him to construct “a rather curious hierarchy of thirteen forms of cinema” (Kruger & Petrie 1999, p. 56)

The argument that Grierson articulated in the 1930s for the importance of documentary film production in Britain should be considered in the context of the rise of fascism in Europe and a subsequent need to address serious issues through film. It is therefore fair to assume that Jennings’s association with, and interest in surrealism places him, in Rotha’s scheme, amongst the producers of “Avant-Garde and Trick Films” (Rotha 1936, p. 133) rather than “Films Of Fact” (Rotha, 1936 p. 109). The distinction that Rotha makes in 1936 between avant-garde and documentary film however lacks any real complexity and is an issue that has been returned to by subsequent writers on documentary such as Nichols who has articulated a broader interpretation of the form. Grierson appears to maintain a deep seated criticism of Jennings’s films, a critique that is targeted at Jennings the person as much as at the films that he made. Grierson admired Rotha’s films for their poetic qualities (Sussex 1975, p. 58) but was critical of the same aspects in Jennings’s work, describing him as:

a minor poet. I don’t think he was a great poet. He was a minor poet. How do I feel about his work? I’ll tell you how I feel about his work. Jennings was a very stilted person. He was not very coordinated physically, and I find his films reflect that. (Sussex 1975, p. 110)

Bill Nichols has argued that documentary as a distinct film form arises from the combination in film production of Poetic Experimentation, Narrative Storytelling and Rhetorical Oratory at a specific historical moment i.e. the 1920s and early 1930s (Nichols 2001, p. 88). Jennings embodies this combination of characteristics. As a poet and member of the Surrealist group in England, he would have been equally aware of Epstein's notion of *photogénie* and Russian montage theory. His study of and broadcasts on literature demonstrate his awareness of narrative storytelling and rhetorical oratory. Although Nichols argues for the crucial role that Grierson played in the documentary tradition by establishing an institutional base for documentary film production, it is Jennings who combines the two elements that, in Nichols's terms, create the documentary form: "the uncanny capacity of film images and photographs to bear the physical imprint of what they record" alongside "the compulsion... to explore this capacity" (Nichols 2001, p. 84).

If Jennings's importance as a filmmaker was doubted by Grierson, other contemporaries such as Cavalcanti were more alert to the poetic qualities of Jennings's work, Cavalcanti describes the films that they made together as "perhaps the best jobs that were done at the GPO" (Sussex 1975, p. 110). After Jennings's death, the early and fairly brief critical appreciations of his work such as those by Basil Wright in 1952 and Lindsay Anderson's key article for *Sight and Sound* (Anderson 1954) were developed by a range of authors through the 1960s, leading to *Studies in Documentary* (Lovell & Hillier 1972). It is in this book, that Jennings is first placed as central to the British documentary tradition

and described as “the British cinema’s one undoubted *auteur*” (Lovell & Hillier 1972, p. 62). The book is divided into three essays, the first on Grierson, the second on Jennings and the third on Anderson and the Free Cinema movement. In the weight given to Jennings in this book (as opposed to other possible subjects such as Basil Wright or Alberto Cavalcanti), we can see the emergence of Jennings as an icon for a certain type of poetic documentary. Rather than being a propagandist, working on state sponsored productions, Jennings surfaces as an auteur with associated masterpieces. Despite his limited output compared to the likes of Hitchcock or Powell and Pressburger he is now seen by some as the British equivalent of Jean Vigo (Roberts G. 2007, p. 97). A few films have been described as Jennings’s masterpiece, with different writers at different times promoting *Listen to Britain* (see Richards 2005, p. 136), *Fires Were Started* (see Armes 1978, p. 154) and *A Diary for Timothy* (see Anderson 1954, p. 186). Of these films, *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister 1942) has become the most well known of his works, often described as “Jennings’ greatest film” (Roberts G. 2007, p. 96). In a 2007 programme of films at the National Film Theatre, the four films by Jennings that are now “an inspiration to modern filmmakers” (Boon & Russell 2007, p. 40) are *Spare Time* (1939), *Words for Battle* (1941), *The Silent Village* (1943) and *Listen to Britain* (1942). Of these four films *The Silent Village* (1943), a re-imagined reconstruction of a contemporary event, resonates with a disturbing uncanniness is ripe for reassessment as evidenced by the exhibition *The Silent Village* shown at Ffotogallery in Cardiff (January 16<sup>th</sup> – February 27<sup>th</sup> 2010). How *The Silent Village* (1943), and his other dramatic reconstruction, *Fires Were Started* (1943), along with his reputation as “Britain’s greatest

documentary director” (Boon & Russell 2007, p. 40), relate to subsequent film production is an avenue for further exploration. In order to do this, I will now consider the relationship between documentary and the notion of avant-garde film practice in order to explore how Jennings’s poetic style has become seemingly increasingly relevant to contemporary filmmakers.

### Documentary and The Avant-Garde

Although Grierson’s use of the term documentary in his 1926 review of *Moana* (Flaherty 1926) and his subsequent definition of documentary as the “Creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1946, p. 11) is seen as the genesis of the documentary movement and documentary form, it has been noted (Winston 1995, p. 9) that documentary had been used in the same sense by other writers as early as 1914 when the photographer and filmmaker, Edward Sheriff Curtis used the term in the prospectus for his film *In the Land of the Headhunters* (Curtis 1914) which he described as a “documentary work” (Winston 1995, p. 9). Winston traces the term “documentary” back to its roots in the legal realm, its relationship to the document (in the form of a letter, contract or charter) and to notions of evidence as required by a court of law. He considers how photography and film as technology came to be used as documents for evidential purposes.

The photograph was received, from the beginning, as a document and therefore as evidence. This evidential status was passed to the cinematograph and is a source of the ideological power of documentary film. (Winston 1995, p. 11)

In Grierson's definition, it is actuality that distinguishes documentary from other forms of film production. Photography and cinematography as actuality, the camera as a scientific instrument for recording the world, may appear to pre-date the artistic or allegorical uses of cinematography but this distinction between actuality and creativity is not necessarily useful. It may be more appropriate to reconsider whether early works such as the fifty-second long film *A Boat Leaving Harbour* (*Barque Sortant du Port*, Lumière 1895) should be defined as actualities rather than documentaries because they supposedly exist before the application of Grierson's other two elements (creativity and treatment) to film production. Although this Lumière film may have been intended as a scientific record of the world or a demonstration of the Lumière apparatus, the viewer's response also has to be considered. Dai Vaughn describes *A Boat Leaving Harbour* as overwhelming him with a "sense of the *potentiality* of the medium" (Vaughn 1990, p. 64) and we cannot help but ascribe narrative (treatment) and poetics (creativity) to the images (actuality).

Grierson did not create the documentary film through his definition but, through his writing and production work, he attempted to create a documentary movement with a series of principles and a specific purpose. His early writings were collected in *Grierson on Documentary* (Grierson 1946) and in this book, we can trace Grierson's endeavour. He describes himself as a critic searching for "revelation" (Grierson 1946, p. 27) in cinema. Writing in the early 1930s, he prefigures auteur theory as he outlines the "greatness" (Grierson 1946, p. 27) of directors such as Hitchcock, Chaplin, Vidor and Sternberg and argues that the role

of the critic is to see beyond the excitement and spectacle of cinema to the “decent intention” (Grierson 1946, p. 27). The general tenor of his writing however is an argument for the use of realism in film as a medium for education and an enabler of social reform. In places, his writings have the feel of an avant-garde manifesto as can be seen in his “First Principles of Documentary” (Grierson 1946, pp. 78-89), which he articulates in the form of a credo and which is the closest we have to a manifesto of the British documentary movement.

1) We believe that the cinema’s capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form... 2) We believe that the original (or native actor), and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world... 3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophical sense) than the acted article. (Grierson 1946, pp. 79-80)

In his early writings, Grierson decries “the monstrous undisciplined force” (Grierson 1946, p. 106) of commercial cinema yet he is also quite dismissive of avant-garde cinema which he describes as having “raised its head wherever family fortune and youthful enthusiasm have allowed it.” (Grierson 1946, p. 112). He describes German expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Wiene 1920) as “humourless and sombre” (Grierson 1946, p. 105) and writes of the avant-garde movement as a French phenomenon that is no longer extant; “The *avant garde* movement blew up because its directors were economic innocents” (Grierson 1946, p. 113). Grierson and Rotha attempt to distinguish their documentary movement from the avant-garde in its social



purpose and they emphasise the importance of montage to film as art (Grierson 1946, pp. 113-114). Although quite cynical about the motives of the French filmmakers such as Renoir and Clair, Grierson's writings are shot through with an element of the utopian modernism of the Soviet and European avant-garde. In his critique of Ruttmann's film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttmann 1927) he concludes:

The artist need not posit the ends – for that is the work of the critic – but the ends must be there, informing his description and giving finality (beyond space and time) to the slice of life he has chosen. For that larger effect there must be power of poetry or prophecy. Failing either or both in the highest degree, there must be at least the sociological sense implicit in poetry and prophecy. (Grierson 1946, p. 84)

This argument for poetry and prophecy, allied with an exploration of the medium in Grierson's *First Principles of Documentary* (Grierson 1946, pp. 78-89), seems to equate him with the notion of avant-garde as defined by Dusienerre: "The term avant-garde is intended towards those films... which seek an alliance with modernism in other arts, which demand a consistent interrogation of the medium" (Dusienerre 1996, p. 66). Dusienerre argues that, in 1930s Britain, avant-garde film manifested itself "only through an institution of criticism" such as the journals *Film Art*, *Close Up*, *Cinema Quarterly* and *World Film News*. Rather than being "a specific aesthetic style or a specific production situation" (Dusienerre 1996, p. 66), he defines the avant-garde in Britain as a "progressive aspiration" which "varied in degree and goal" but which "anticipated a progressive intervention from the cinema" (Dusienerre 1996, p. 66). As there was

no organised school or movement of avant-garde or modernist film production in Britain, experimental modernist work manifested itself as an attitude that could be gleaned in films produced for commercial and state-sponsored film production units where artist filmmakers were “working within the avant-garde ambience, if in somewhat compromised circumstances” (Dusinberre 1996, p. 71). For the artist filmmaker, the only real access to the expensive means of cinematic production in Britain in the 1930s was Grierson’s documentary movement and it is not therefore too surprising that Jennings and others with an interest in the avant-garde (such as Lye and Cavalcanti) worked within the advertising and state-sponsored sector. This positioning of the documentary movement as an element of the British avant-garde is examined in 1972 by Alan Lovell. He describes film in Britain as having developed into two strands: a majority culture of popular commercial films and an established art-house minority culture. He sees this minority culture as having grown out of Bloomsbury ideals: “A valorising of the personal and the poetic and a suspicion of theory and scholarship” (Lovell 1972, p. 7) and makes a case for the key role that British documentary films took in the establishment of the notion that art can exist in state-sponsored projects and is “the free expression of a personal vision... removed from any social or economic context” (Lovell 1972, p. 8). Lovell argues that the established minority film culture (led by the state-supported journal *Sight and Sound*) promoted poetic moments in the films of the documentary movement as well as the notion of individual filmmakers as artists. He queries whether the films of the documentary movement should be considered as avant-garde or progressive when they are produced by and for a conservative

institutional status quo. This argument is developed in Brian Winston's critique of the Griersonian documentary.

Winston asserts that, although they claimed to make films with a social purpose, the Griersonians avoided the two most important issues of the decade: The rise of fascism in Europe and the Depression. The British worker was depicted as "a figure virtually without passion and anger, without unredressed grievance, almost without culture and institutions, and above all a worker without politics." (Winston 1995, p. 80). Winston describes how some other more radical filmmakers attempted to create films as a counterbalance to the official newsreels of the USA and UK such as Norman McLaren and Ivor Montagu's *Defence of Madrid* (1936). He uses two examples of films that were produced without sponsors, rare situations "where the filmmaker and the sponsor are, in effect, one and the same." (Winston 1995, p. 84): Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930) and Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes*, 1933). "*Land Without Bread* is so 'independent' as to call into question the implicit truth claims of the realist cinema in general – to call them into question and to mock their pretension." (Winston 1995, p. 85). Winston argues that it was possible to make independent films in Britain but those produced tend to depart from the institutional norms and appeared amateur to the British film critics. He asserts that the "amateur aesthetic" (Winston 1995, p. 86) of these films:

is not necessarily a disaster, if these are aesthetic choices, rather than accidents. It is possible to justify such an aesthetic strategy on political grounds... Breaking those norms can therefore be positioned as a

deliberated blow against hegemonic practice. For instance, it can be argued that *A propos de Nice* and *Land Without Bread* depart from the norms exactly to critique them. (Winston 1995, p. 86)

This tactic can be seen in the work of subsequent avant-garde filmmakers such as Godard's involvement with the Dziga Vertov group in the 1960s. We can see that there is a dynamic relationship between conceptions of avant-garde film production, as an interrogation of the medium, and the documentary movement, as a means of representing reality or creating state propaganda. Although Grierson and the British documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s made some attempts to distance themselves from European avant-garde practice. This can be seen in Grierson's critique of the city symphony film or Rotha's assertion that the "Continental Realists... create nothing more valuable to civilisation than a shower of rain" (Rotha 1952, pp. 108 - 109). This may well have been merely a useful position to take in terms of attracting sponsorship and enabling the filmmakers' practice.

#### Critiques of Grierson's Documentary Movement

The filmmakers involved in the British documentary movement at the EMB, GPO and Crown Film Units were not of the masses, but observed them from a distance while professing an interest in improving their conditions. The problem inherent in this distanced observational approach is that poverty becomes another country, a beautifully photographed and exotic place. Jennings was criticised by Grierson for taking this patronising attitude in his portrayal of the working classes in *Spare Time* (Jennings 1939) but, as Ian Walker has suggested, Jennings's approach to

the Mass-Observation project (which *Spare Time* parallels) was to “make of Surrealism something other than romanticised escapism, and of documentary something other than realist usefulness.” (Walker 2007, p. 98). In his cinematic observations, Jennings, rather than creating beautiful compositions to support a propagandist agenda, is attempting to make surrealist uses of the exoticisation of the homely. Perhaps the criticisms of *Spare Time* were due to the way that it refused to prettify and personalise its subject matter.

Winston describes this approach to representation of social issues as “running away from social meaning” (Winston 1995, pp. 35 - 39). The approach did not just involve “prettifying aesthetics at home” (Winston 1995, p. 39) but also abroad where films such as *The Song of Ceylon* (Wright 1935) avoided exploring the working conditions of the tea-pickers in favour of a poetic exploration devoid of social or reformist critique. Winston argues that it was not only in aesthetic terms that the documentary makers ran away from social meaning, the avoidance was also evident in the development of what he identifies as the victim documentary. “The victim documentary is the Griersonians’ most potent legacy. Social victims are the realist documentary’s staple subjects into the present.” (Winston 1995, p. 40). He traces the source of this representation of social victims to the French realist paintings of Courbet and Millet, describing this representation as the antithesis of the heroic figure depicted by the Soviet filmmakers. The Griersonians attempted a combination of the two, focussing on “the heroic victim, a move which allowed for the poetry of poverty and the exoticism of the underclass to be displayed washed over with ‘social purpose’.”

(Winston 1995, p. 40). Humphrey Jennings's documentary films tend to avoid this approach, emphasising the poetic elements of social relations and concrete reality rather than presenting the working classes as victims or sociological case studies.

Winston also identifies what he calls the "problem moment" (Winston 1995, p. 42) structure as a technique used by the Griersonians in order to "cripple the possibility of meaningful social analysis and comment within a realist text." (Winston 1995, p. 43). In the problem moment film, a social issue becomes a brief problem in "the unfolding history of the nation" (Winston 1995, p. 42), that will pass. In the problem moment film there is always a solution for problems such as the slums and the institutional, state or industrial sponsor of the film usually provides this solution. *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister 1942) could easily have become the ultimate in problem moment films as the possibility of an imminent invasion threads through the piece, but in Jennings's film there is no solution to be provided by an external sponsor. The film is a symphony of nationalism (paradoxically key sequences feature music by a German composer) that offers no certain response except to suggest social cohesion exists in Britain and that there is a way of life that might be worth preserving. Uncertainty hovers over a film that offers up a mirror to the viewer, redolent with poetry and emotion.

Winston also discusses the Griersonian trope of the stilted performance: "The overall impression of the British presented in these films is of a people almost completely without emotion." (Winston 1995, p. 43) It was the "stilted camaraderie" (Winston 1995, p. 43) of Britain's wartime propaganda films that

allowed “a class-ridden and historically divided society to be portrayed as ‘one nation’.” (Winston 1995, p. 43). Jennings manages to transcend this trope in some of his films; through a collaborative approach in *The Silent Village* (1943) and an observational approach in *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister 1942). Winston outlines the idea that Grierson’s published statements suggest that he believed his films “were meant to make things happen” (Winston 1995, p. 59) but that, in reality, they had very little effect on public opinion or social policy.

But this failure to register did not matter to the film-makers because the entire enterprise was actually not about reception at all, much less education. It was about something else – it was about film. It was about getting films made, being film-makers – nothing more. (Winston 1995, p. 59)

Winston summarises the Griersonian movement as a model consisting of: “right-wing money, left-wing kudos and films of dubious social worth in the middle.” (Winston 1995, p. 60). He sees this model as being “far more seductive to film-makers than to audiences” (Winston 1995, p. 61) and concludes that Grierson’s legacy “is an audiovisual form that most of the time nobody – certainly nobody who is not middle-class – wants to watch; and it is arguable that they never did.” (Winston 1995, p. 61).

Jennings’s films are important to the history of British documentary as they are of the movement while being somewhat “aloof from the movement” (Lovell & Hillier 1972, p. 62). Writers such as Winston argue that Jennings may have produced poetic and impressionistic works but his films avoid social meaning and

are, in the main, still clearly narrativised through the use of chronological structures.

Jennings's strategies well illustrate the strength of the prison of narrative into which the Griersonian demand for 'treatment' locks the realist documentary. His is the most poetic, impressionist oeuvre and yet it is usually strongly time-based. (Winston 1995, p. 107)

Winston has only been able to identify one of Jennings's films that avoids causality and temporality and yet still works as a documentary, this is Jennings's *Words for Battle* (1941), his only film that doesn't follow a clear chronology and one that was criticised by his contemporaries mainly because, Winston argues, it has a non-narrative form (Winston 1995, p. 112). Stella Bruzzi (2000) has discussed Winston's ideas in relation to more recent films such as *London* (Keiller, 1994) and *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985) where the "presence of the author is a significant intervention" (Bruzzi 2000, p. 99). This reflexivity can be traced back to Jennings, whose films were not only observations of actuality but also personal reflections on the historical determinants of contemporary events. Jennings can be seen as a parallel of the mythological Robinson figure who appears in Patrick Keiller's trilogy (*London* [1994], *Robinson in Space* [1997], *Robinson in Ruins* [2010]) and Christopher Petit's novel *Robinson* (Petit 1993). Like Robinson, Jennings is a charming, cultured figure who observes and comments on British society. Through his films he transmutes personal observations of innocuous everyday events into the realm of the symbolic.



Winston also discusses the importance of reconstruction and its relation to the verisimilitude of documentary texts. He identifies the fine line between neo-realist drama and documentary film, how at one point in the 1960s they had become “largely indistinguishable” (Winston 1995, p. 122). Reconstruction has continued to be an important issue in relation to documentary texts. This desire to assert the absence of reconstruction could account for the performative documentaries of the 1990s and beyond. Again we can see Jennings engages with the issue, as two of his most important films - *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *The Silent Village* (1943) - are fictions that attempt to reconstruct historical events in two quite distinct ways. Reconstruction was a staple of the British documentary school, where studio-based or scripted scenes were constructed to stand in for actuality without acknowledgment of their artificial nature. One example of this is the interior scenes of the mail coach in *Night Mail* (Watt & Wright, 1936) that were filmed at the GPO studios in Blackheath and intercut with material shot on location. Where Jennings’s two films differ is that they clearly state their reconstructed nature. *Fires Were Started* has a caption at the end of the opening credits that reads “This is a picture of the earlier days – the bitter days of winter and spring 1940/41 – played by the firemen and firewomen themselves.” *The Silent Village* is subtitled “The story of the men of Lidice who lit in Fascist darkness a lamp that shall never be put out” and the opening credits explain that the film was made in their honour in a Welsh mining community. Both films admit their artificiality in terms of their reconstructed nature but assert their verisimilitude in the use of unprofessional actors to perform the drama of a reconstructed version of historical events.

Nichols sees the documentary film as being less defined by narrative or poetics and more engaged with rhetoric. He outlines the Western tradition of spoken and written language as being divided into three broad (although non-exclusive) categories: poetics and narrative, logic and rhetoric. In general documentary is “about the effort to convince, persuade or predispose us to a particular view of the actual world we occupy” (Nichols 2001, p. 69). Documentaries use concrete events to illustrate abstract concepts such as war, inequality or freedom. “The documentary value of non-fiction films lies in how they give visual, and audible, representations to topics for which our written or spoken language gives us concepts.” (Nichols 2001, p. 65). In a documentary film the camera records concrete events and combines them with a script and soundtrack in order to represent concepts.

documentary films usually contain a tension between the specific and the general, between historically unique moments and generalizations... It is the combination of the two, the individual shots and scenes that locate us in a particular time and place and the organization of these elements into a larger whole, that gives documentary film and video its power and fascination. (Nichols 2001, p. 66)

By the 1990s, writers have begun to react against the idea that the documentary movement is Britain’s most important contribution to cinema. There is a move to promote other genres such as melodrama, horror and experimental cinema that have been marginalised by the importance given to documentary in terms of British national cinema. This can be seen in Peter Hutchings’s work on the British

horror film *Hammer and Beyond* (1993), Sue Harper's work on the British melodrama *Picturing the Past* (1994) and A.L. Rees's work on experimental film *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (1999) that places British experimental film from 1966 – 1998 in the context of a canon of avant-garde film-making. Jennings tends to escape the criticisms levelled at Griersonian filmmaking by being an exceptional subject to the extent that he is cited as one of the redeeming features of the GPO film unit. In relation to avant-garde cinema, Rees considers that one way of considering Grierson in a positive light is the way in which he championed “modern artists, poets and film-makers even when – as with Humphrey Jennings – they were too ‘arty’ for his own taste.” (Rees 1999, p. 52). Jennings did not completely escape the critique and the perceived reactionary nature of films such as *Diary for Timothy* (Jennings, 1945) and *Family Portrait* (Jennings, 1950) led to some disparagement of his work as representing an “inability to conceptualise the transformation of the social world in concrete terms” and a “flaccid and indulgent despair” (Britton 1989, p. 44). These negative reactions are offset by the importance of Jennings and documentary to British cinema as an on-going cultural concern. The films of Humphrey Jennings are key to an understanding of the breadth of the British documentary tradition, disproving the notion that films of this era are dry, patronising depictions of a class bound society. They are also important to the history of documentary film in that they contain seeds of future developments. Despite his style of montage we can still see some parallels between Jennings's observational works, such as *Spare Time* (1939) and the 1960s direct cinema work: Roberts sees Jennings as a “precursor of the radical cinema movement of the Third Cinema” (Roberts 2007,

p. 97). We can see the imagined reconstruction of *The Silent Village* played out in fictions such as *It Happened Here* (1965) and we can see something of *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943) in contemporary films that attempt to fictionalise historical events such as *World Trade Center* (Stone, 2006). His poetic approach in *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) or *A Diary for Timothy* has either directly influenced or prefigures the work of subsequent filmmakers such as Terence Davies, Patrick Keiller, Derek Jarman and Chris Marker.

Writers on documentary continue to find Jennings's work to be an important cultural touchstone. John Corner (1996) sees *Listen To Britain* replayed in documentaries such as *Living on the Edge* (Grisby, 1987) where the threat is no longer from outside but from inside as he investigates the effects of Thatcherism on Britain. We can see the appropriation of Jennings in films such as *London* (Keiller, 1994) and *Of Time and the City* (Davies, 2008). Jennings is the first filmmaker to attempt a representation of Britain that is informed by a broad series of ideas where disorientation and challenges to conventional hierarchies are managed through a poetic and political reconstruction of historical contingencies. Jennings's work has proved useful and important to writers on documentary film because it is a discreet body of experimental work that explores observation, memory, realism, reconstruction, reportage and crisis with a clear awareness of the poetics of modernist art practice. Although some of his films are flawed and there is an inconsistency in the quality of his work, taken as a whole, there is experimentation with the documentary form that can be used to make sense of its subsequent developments and each film is ripe for rediscovery and re-appropriation by a broad range of filmmakers and theorists.

## Chapter 2: Humphrey Jennings and British Surrealism.

This chapter explores the development of Surrealism, its subsequent spread in Britain and the extent of Humphrey Jennings's involvement with the movement. Although it has been asserted that Jennings's films ultimately work in a way that is "alien to surrealism" (Richardson 2006, p. 86), I will argue that Jennings's role in the establishment and development of surrealism in Britain<sup>1</sup> was important and, in subsequent chapters, I will examine how Jennings's work may have informed the establishment of a surrealist sensibility in British national cinema. This chapter starts by identifying three paradoxes that may be useful in understanding the nature of British surrealism. These three paradoxes are then used to explore surrealism in Britain, particularly in relation to the events around the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936 in London, Mass-Observation and romanticism. The chapter concludes with a brief positioning of Jennings's films in relation to the three paradoxes, forming an introduction to the more detailed examination of his work in chapter three.

### Three Paradoxes of Surrealism

Richardson identifies three principal factors that mitigate against the surrealist credibility of Jennings's work: firstly, that his films were produced within the didactic context of a documentary movement established by John Grierson; secondly, that his key films were made for propaganda purposes as part of the British war effort; thirdly, and to Richardson "perhaps most significant"

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<sup>1</sup> Although I am discussing surrealism in Britain, it should be noted that the surrealist group was established as the Surrealist Group in England and that debates in the 1930s and 1940s tended to be concerned with notions of relationship between surrealism and Englishness (as opposed to a wider British identity).

(Richardson 2006, p. 86), was Jennings's "sentimental attachment to an English romantic tradition of identification with the land" (Richardson 2006, p. 86). This is not entirely the case as Jennings's movement away from the English surrealist group was fomented by Herbert Read's attempts to associate surrealism with Romanticism. Jennings's interest in the land and his association with notions of British nationalism are ambiguous; less romantic and more dialectical. Jennings's interest is in what might later be considered a psychogeographic exploration of history, traditions and the spirit of the nation. The main site of these explorations is the landscape in its broadest sense, including the urban, domestic, industrial and pastoral. British Surrealism is not without its landscape artists and concerns similar to Jennings's can be identified in the landscapes of Paul Nash and the cityscapes of Conroy Maddox. Remy identifies the work of Nash as exemplifying "one crucial aspect of surrealism: the interacting and constantly questioned relationship of the imaginative powers with the world around" (Remy 1999, p. 128) and, in Maddox's collages and paintings, "man appears 'thunderstruck' by the objects whirling around him; landmarks are still noticeable, but lost in the midst of a general short-circuiting of relationships" (Remy 1999, p. 197).

Jennings's work can be considered to attempt this short-circuiting of relationships in order to develop his own thesis on history, location and national identity. Explorations of specific landscapes are perhaps key to the spirit of surrealism and Jennings's relationship to landscape is not necessarily romantic or "fundamentally at odds with surrealist internationalism" (Richardson 2006, p. 86). The paintings of Salvador Dali owe much to his native landscape and the art of René Magritte

inhabits the suburbs of Brussels. Surrealism's response to the pure abstraction of early modernism relies on the historical, psychological and physical aspects of the situations in which it finds itself. Jennings was raised in an English village and it is the village that threads through his work as the cardinal location of British surrealism. Jennings's work exposes the network of unconscious energies that permeate the village, exploring the psychology of the village and applying the results of this film-research to a broader investigation of the mythology of national identity. The machinations of a society driven by technological development are played out in the locus of the village. The village is, in effect, the key determinant of British surrealism – the site of English surrealism where the meetings of rationality and irrationality, of the conscious and the unconscious, the self and the object are played out through a dance of social relations within a landscape that is neither urban nor rural. The situation of surrealism depends on such investigations and, in many ways it is the position of Jennings as propagandist poet, nationalist internationalist, realist surrealist that makes him important to the development of surrealism in Britain.

Surrealism is a paradoxical construct replete with contradictions and there are a number of paradoxes that float around the idea of surrealism. The effective goal or definition of surrealism is itself a conundrum, i.e. the resolution of the contradiction between two states of existence, that of the dream and that of reality. As Breton outlines in the first Manifesto of Surrealism:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak. (Breton, 1924, p. 14)

There are three further anomalies that are perhaps more useful in attempting to define British surrealism and tie the work of Humphrey Jennings to the surrealist project. The first paradox is that surrealism is placeless and timeless, yet born in a specific place and time. The second is that surrealism is an international movement with distinct national identities. The third is that the movement asserts the importance of individual freedom yet also emphasises the abdication of the individual through automatism and collaborative work.

Paradox 1: Surrealism is placeless and timeless yet born in a specific place and time.

Despite its existence as a historical movement founded in a particular place and time with a clearly identifiable leader, writers on surrealism have, from its inception, positioned the movement as a project that transcends narrow historicism.

Surrealism is *not* a school of literature or painting, it is *not* a system of aesthetics. Hence its origins are not to be found in any particular epoch, though a number of writers in the last century, particularly in France, provided the immediate impetus to those men who during the last ten or fifteen years have devoted their whole attention to it, have defined it and given it a name, and have considerably enriched both literature and painting, as well as the cinema, by their researches. (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 25)



The first overview of the movement published in English is *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (Gascoyne, 1935/2000), written by David Gascoyne, an English poet who was a member of the surrealist movement. As well as outlining the development of Parisian surrealism in the inter-war years, his slim survey explores surrealism's ancestral heritage in figures such as De Sade, Baudelaire and Rimbaud as well as its roots in the Dada movement.

Unlike the Dada group, the surrealist movement does not imagine itself as a solely destructive force and, in its dialectical negation of the Dadaist's negation, it emphasises the importance of love and laughter to revolutionary social change. Opposing the Futurist's notion of the beauty of war, the surrealists react against the idea of new technology as a salve to a damaged society. Eschewing Futurist conceptions of technical progress, they are more intrigued by the outmoded than the modern (as, for example, can be seen in Abbott and Man Ray's adoption of Eugène Atget's [1857-1927] photographic record of *Old Paris*) and turn to the ideas of Freud, applying his discoveries to literature. Rather than forging ahead to a new rational utopia, they delve inwards to the realm of the dream and the irrational; indeed the science of the irrational could be seen as a further surrealist paradox.

It is henceforth demonstrated that man is not just a "reasoner" nor even a "sentimental reasoner" as too many poets have been up to now, but also a sleeper, a confirmed sleeper who wins every night, in his dreams, the treasure that he will dissipate by day in small change... But the surrealists

are not politicians nor scientists, philosophers nor even physicians. They are poets, specialists in language, and it is language they will attack first. (Nadeau 1968, pp. 48 - 49)

Nadeau's book remains a model for subsequent histories of surrealism, considering it as an international literary movement situated in the inter-war years, led from Paris by Louis Aragon, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Peret and Phillipe Soupault. Although Nadeau acknowledges that surrealism is "the heir and extender of the artistic movements which preceded it and without which it would not have existed" (Nadeau 1968, p. 43), he gives the surrealist movement a specific time frame, existing from 1918 to 1939; "its birth more or less coincident with the end of the First World War, its dissolution with the beginning of the Second" (Nadeau 1968, p. 36). The establishment of a surrealist group in England took place towards the end of this period and, although Jennings's direct involvement with the movement had waned by 1939, he remained deeply marked by his engagement with surrealist ideas. Jennings's importance to the history of surrealism is tied to the fact that he was present at the formation of the English surrealist group and, of all those involved, his subsequent position and influence has been one of the most difficult to define. This difficulty is mainly due to his preeminence as a documentary filmmaker, however the reassessment of Jennings as a surrealist artist has grown apace in recent years with his inclusion in exhibitions of thematic shows of surrealist art and a 2012 show of his work at the Firstsite gallery in Colchester (September – November 2012).

Written in 1944, the foreword to Nadeau's book states his intention to take surrealism seriously but already talks about the movement in the past tense. "It must be 'surmounted and left behind' by its continuers" (Nadeau 1968, p. 36). The notion of surrealism's existence as a spirit outside of time or conventional ideas of literary movements has been explored by subsequent writers and is summarised by Nicholas Royle in his discussion of Freud's notions of the death drive and the uncanny.

But is it so certain that there has ever been surrealism? Rather than consider it as a cultural and aesthetic 'phenomenon' of the earlier twentieth century, and indeed rather than consider it a still active 'movement'... could we not suppose that surrealism remains a strange 'non-event' that has no proper place, but still haunts? (Royle 2003, p. 97)

Royle's questioning of whether surrealism has ever existed and the relationship of the movement to historicism can be illustrated by the lists of proto-surrealist precursors nominated by Breton as well as in the development of dissident surrealist organisations such as the Situationist International (1957 – 1972). The clearest verification of the existence of surrealism as a phenomenon is most likely to be found in the instances of established national groups such as the English Surrealist Group and is evidenced in their artifacts, publications and statements.

Paradox 2: Surrealism is an international movement with distinct national identities.

Surrealism was but one aspect of modernist terrain during the inter-war years and, among other things owes a debt to Apollinaire's 1918 manifesto essay, *L'Esprit*

*nouveau*. Breton and his contemporaries initially saw Apollinaire as “a kind of god” (Nadeau 1968, p. 53) and despite the waning influence of *L’Esprit nouveau*, he remained an important influence. In 1942 Breton wrote that Apollinaire “came closer than anyone to thinking that in order to better the world it was not enough to rebuild it on a more equitable social basis” (Breton 1942, p. 58). Apollinaire’s new spirit involved poetry as a tool for research towards a new realism and a refuge from war. His essay calls for poets to cast away the “enchanted clothing” (Apollinaire 1918/1971, p. 229) of Wagnerian romanticism, looking forward to the poetic freedom offered by the new technologies of photography and cinema and to the freedom from national borders offered by “the telephone, the wireless and aviation” (Apollinaire, 1918/1971, p. 229) while also being wary of “the excesses of the Russian and Italian Futurists” (Apollinaire, 1918/1971, p. 228). Perhaps the relationship between nationalism and internationalism may not seem so paradoxical but it is crucial to Richardson’s dismissal of Jennings’s cinematic surrealism and, as I will explore later, attempts to square this circle in England led to disagreements that ultimately resulted in Jennings and others distancing themselves from the Surrealist Group in England. In relation to the development of the surrealist spirit across the world, it should be noted that Apollinaire argued for the importance of the development of national literary identities. The development of surrealism in Britain and the other different national instances of surrealism can be seen in relation to Apollinaire’s assertion that.

Art will only cease being national the day that the whole universe, living in the same climate, in houses built in the same style, speaks the same

language with the same accent – that is to say never. (Apollinaire 1918/1971, p. 229)

This question of the relationship between art and place was important to debates about modernism in Britain in the 1930s. Alexandra Harris uses Stevie Smith as an example of a “European thinker” who “was proud to live in the same house all her life, and intent on translating the world into her own English idiom” (Harris 2010, p. 150), citing Smith as writing “There can be no good art that is international” (Harris 2010, p. 150). This same concern of translating modernist ideas into an English idiom became one of the key areas of debate around the time of the 1936 international surrealist exhibition in London.

Apollinaire’s essay has a nationalist bent in its argument that “art increasingly has a country” (Apollinaire 1918/1971, p. 229) and his statement that “As far as we know, there are scarcely any poets today outside the French language” (Apollinaire 1918/1971, p. 235). It is not unexpected that, according to Nadeau, by 1918, *l’Esprit nouveau* had ceased to interest Breton, and that he had begun questioning art, taking Jacques Vaché’s words “Art is nonsense” (Nadeau 1968, p. 58) to heart. Breton had met the “sophisticated anarchist” (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 38) Jacques Vaché by chance in 1916. Vaché, who was to commit suicide two years later, was neither an artist nor a writer but his ideas, recorded in his letters attacking art and literature (including attacks on Apollinaire), had “considerable influence of the future leader of the Surrealist movement” (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 38). An important political provocation of this time that mirrors Breton’s distancing himself from French nationalism was the Rachilde Incident (see

Nadeau 1968, pp. 114 - 115) where the surrealists attacked nationalism and the French state, their opposition to nation, family and religion leading to collaboration with concrete political issues. We can consider this second paradox personified in the influences of Apollinaire and Vaché on Breton. We can also identify this paradox in the British surrealists' relationship to landscape and to British history which is one of the defining features of surrealism in England and also the most significant reason that Richardson sees Jennings's films as "working against a surrealist perspective" (Richardson 2006, p. 86). If Jennings's work is alien to surrealism due to his "sentimental attachment" (Richardson 2006, p. 86) to the land then the same must be true of the paintings of Paul Nash that rely on "A metaphoric way of construing landscapes and objects, one so intense as to stimulate the process of metamorphosis" (Cardinal 1989, p. 48). Both Jennings and Nash were interested in the "*Genius Loci* – the spirit of a place" (Cardinal 1989, p. 15) and their attachment to landscape is less romantic than lyrical and alchemical.

What defines surrealism in Britain is its location in the rural rather than the urban setting and this can be explored through an analysis of the work and influence of Jennings. His films are distinguished by an intense and persistent desire to draw connections across time, space, class and politics. His works attempt to outline an internationalist portrait of Britain as being at the heart of Europe yet with a distinctive national temperament. British surrealism, whether it is Roland Penrose at Farley Farm (and Hampstead village), Paul Nash at Swanage and Rye, Jennings at Walberwick or Edwards James at Chilgrove, always returns to the village. The

Parisian Surrealists celebrated the urban world of the arcade, the boulevard, the café and nightclub but their urbanism too was drawn towards the multiple villages of Paris. Communication across time, space and class is managed in Jennings's films through reference to his literary collage work *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985). His films are informed by this disorientating, revolutionary and mythical world of the Industrial Revolution, allowing Jennings's work to push against the boundaries of surrealist thought. He explores ideas of technological and social progress in a way that Walter Benjamin parallels in his *Arcades Project* (2002). Where the Parisian arcade becomes important to Benjamin's discussions of modernity, Jennings examines the village. During the Second World War, the village was a reality on the verge of destruction – an idea that was played out in Lidice and one that returns in *The Silent Village* to haunt reality and the future. In Jennings's village, the rural landscape is not a pastoral idyll but a place of uncertainty. Its nature is defined by threats from outside: land clearances, invasion from industry or fascism. Jennings's village is a place of folk customs, history and timeless mystery. The village concretises notions of the space between the conscious and subconscious where it becomes the prime location of the British surrealist movement.

### Paradox 3: Individual freedom through collaborative work and the abdication of the individual.

The first surrealist manifesto argued for the rejection of the novel form in literature, appealing instead to “psychic automatism” (Breton 1924, p. 26) - a means of expressing the “actual functioning of thought” (Breton 1924, p. 26)

through techniques such as automatic writing. In his introduction to *The History of Surrealism* (Nadeau 1968), Robert Shattuck asserts that the surrealists used these techniques in order to position themselves as “The first important artists since the romantics to attempt political action in order to improve society” (Shattuck 1968, p. 15). To this, Shattuck counters Sartre’s critique of surrealism as “flickering” (Shattuck 1968, pp. 28 - 29) between the importance of the individual and the abdication of the individual through automatic writing and chance. Sartre’s essay dismisses the surrealist movement, asserting that “The best they can hope for is to set themselves up as a primitive and secret society on the model of the Ku Klux Klan” (Sartre 1949, p. 183). He describes the spirit of surrealism as related to “Nothingness which is only the endless fluttering of contradictions” (Sartre 1949, p. 178).

...it would be more correct to call it the Impossible or, if you like, the imaginary point where dream and waking, the real and the fictitious, the objective and the subjective, merge. Confusion and not synthesis, for synthesis would appear as an articulated existence, dominating and governing its internal contradictions. (Sartre 1949, p. 178)

Nadeau points out that, although automatic writing was a means often employed by the surrealists in the early days of the movement, not all used it and some, such as Éluard, used it only occasionally. He also mentions that, although the results of the technique were often “unreadable” (Nadeau 1968, p. 91), it helped to liberate poetry from the ivory tower in order for the poet to secrete “poetry naturally into the everyday life of which he is a part” (Nadeau 1968, p. 91). The poetry of everyday life is a theme that could be seen as analogous to the initial aims of the



Mass-Observation movement, a British group that Jennings was instrumental in establishing and an organisation that parallels the Parisian Bureau of Surrealist Research. Nadeau suggests that the Bureau was opened in order to collect “secrets” (Nadeau 1968, p. 92) and, through alchemy, create revolution. *La Révolution surréaliste* was the organ of the Parisian Bureau; a journal based on the scientific magazine (i.e. not visually experimental in the Dada style) with an emphasis on research and experimentation (such as automatic writing). The Mass-Observation writings were similarly published in the form of scientific reports.

The difficulty of resolving the contradiction between individual expression within a defined group is evidenced in Breton’s “excommunication mania” (Nadeau 1968, p. 154). But we can also identify the importance, for any validation of the usefulness of psychic automatism, of this tricky notion of holding together a community of artists in Breton’s model of a castle as a metaphor for the surrealist experiment.

For today I think of a castle... A few of my friends are living here as permanent guests... Moreover the solitude is vast, we don’t often run into one another. And anyway, isn’t what matters that we be the masters of ourselves, the masters of women, and of love too? (Breton 1924, pp. 16 - 17)

The paradox here is twofold: In order to express the actual functioning of an individual’s thought, that individual has to abdicate control of thought. In order to validate the importance of individual expression, this individualism requires a

movement or community of artists with shared aims expressed through jointly authored statements and art works.

What if this castle really existed! My guests are there to prove it does; their whim is the luminous road that leads to it. (Breton 1924, p. 18)

Jennings's engagement with and expulsion from the surrealist movement can be seen in the light of these conundrums as he moves away from individual expression through surrealism towards an attempt to develop his poetics in a response to the historical situation in which he finds himself through the medium of state-supported filmmaking. He also attempted to encourage internationalism through films that emphasise a specific national identity. Shattuck and other writers on the history of the movement tend to be more concerned with the early years of surrealism and its move to the USA via Duchamp's involvement with *The Armory Show* (1913) and magazines of the 1920s such as *Broom* (1921 – 1924), *Transition* (1927 – 1938) and *Little Review* (1914 – 1929). These writers also focus on subsequent developments in the surrealist movement in the USA as a result of the Second World War when the exiled Breton, Ernst and Duchamp collaborated on *VVV Magazine* (1942 – 1944). In order to situate Jennings's role in the development of surrealism in Britain, I would like to consider, in relation to the three paradoxes outlined, how the ideas of surrealism took root and developed in the UK and how Jennings was key to this development.

### The International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936

The arrival of surrealism in Britain and the establishment of an English surrealist group were publically heralded by the comprehensive *International Surrealist Exhibition* that ran from June 12<sup>th</sup> to July 4<sup>th</sup> 1936 at the New Burlington galleries in London. A poster publicising the exhibition proclaims that “Surrealism Has Arrived” (quoted in Remy 1999, p. 75). The show was opened by André Breton with other members of the international movement such as Hans Arp, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst and Man Ray in attendance. The exhibition included work from these and other surrealist luminaries such as René Crevel, Marcel Duchamp, René Magritte, Tristan Tzara and Benjamin Péret alongside British artists selected by the English organizing committee. Roland Penrose and Herbert Read set up the organizing committee in early 1936 with a membership of Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, Humphrey Jennings, Rupert Lee, Diana Brinton Lee, Sheila Legge, Henry Moore, Paul Nash and E.L.T. Mesens.

The establishment of an English surrealist group appears to have roots in the second paradox developing, as it does, from a particular national response to European modernist ideas. The notion that surrealism is placeless and timeless allows Herbert Read and others to nominate elements from the history of British culture as surrealist precursors, arguing that surrealism, and by implication, modernist ideas pre-exist in a Britain that is generally resistant to European modernism. The English group’s establishment is also related to Breton’s moves towards expanding the international nature of surrealism in parallel to the attempted formation of an international leftist political front against the rising tide

of fascism in Europe. This can be seen in Breton's tract "Political Position of Surrealism" (1935). The exhibition is but one arm of an attempt to establish modernist ideas in Britain, building on the work of Paul Nash's *Unit One* group and the *Experiment* group in Cambridge (of which Jennings was a member). In 1933 Nash's *Unit One* tract "A New Force in Art" called for an Apollinaire-esque "truly contemporary spirit" (Nash 1933, p. 98) and a number of members of the group, including Nash, were to sit on the committee of the 1936 surrealist exhibition. Nash established *Unit One* as a modern day Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood with its headquarters at the Mayor gallery in London, a key venue for surrealist exhibitions, having shown work by Miró, Ernst and Dalí in 1933. Charles Madge responded to these first London exhibitions of surrealist art in an article *Surrealism For the English* (1933), published in the literary magazine *New Verse*. The key relationship that Madge raises - an issue that is clearly a major concern of Jennings's work as well as of others subsequently involved in the Surrealist Group in England - is the relationship between the history of English culture and the philosophies of surrealism.

Surrealism is, like all the offspring of Hegel, dialectical in its nature. That is to say, its aims are not best served if English writers imitate the work of French ones, nor if they simply adopt the name of 'surrealist'. Close study of the philosophical position of the French surrealists is needed to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance of the work. But English writers will need something more: namely, a knowledge of their own language and literature. (Madge 1933, p. 14)

From a national perspective, we can see that surrealism in Britain, rather than being a revolutionary break from other modernist ideas, was one of many attempts to establish continental modernism in Britain in the 1930s. As such, many of the British artists included in the 1936 exhibition have allegiances to other groups or are only tangentially related to surrealism, and this partisan nature of British surrealism continues to be an issue in subsequent years.

The idea for an English surrealist group developed from a chance encounter between Roland Penrose and David Gascoyne on the streets of Paris that led to the formal establishment of the English surrealist group and the publication of the *First Manifesto of English Surrealism*, written by Gascoyne in London in May 1935 and published in French in *Cahiers d'Art* (see Remy 1999, p. 71). In his 1935 survey of the movement, Gascoyne continues to promote the establishment of an English surrealist group and the possibility of a surrealist exhibition in London. His discussion of these possibilities is framed in terms of the internationalism of the movement, particularly in relation to Breton's 1935 visit to Prague.

From all this it will be seen that Surrealism has within the last year or so become an international movement, and is today more living than ever; within the near future we may expect developments on a scale unprecedented in the whole of its history. It is within the bounds of possibility that a Surrealist group may be founded shortly in London. André Breton and Paul Eluard have declared their intention of visiting England in the Spring of 1936, and there is talk of a large Surrealist exhibition being held at the same time. (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 92)

It is not necessarily paradoxical that an international movement will develop local groupings but it is in the distinct identities of these national movements that the paradox arises. In English surrealism, even at its formation there arises a specific national identity that is to develop within and then pull apart the Surrealist Group in England. The possibility that established artists and writers will be wary of a Parisian art movement's importation into the English scene is addressed by Gascoyne, who counters the wariness by identifying, not only the "very strong element both of German and Spanish thought" (Gascoyne 2000, p. 94) in surrealism but also the "very strong Surrealist element in English literature" (Gascoyne 2000, p. 94). The relationship between English literature and surrealism, particularly in terms of humour, is supported by Breton's inclusion of Jonathan Swift, Thomas De Quincey and Lewis Carroll in his essay *Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism* (Breton 1936b).

With Swift and Lewis Carroll, the English reader is more fitted than anyone to appreciate the resources of that humour which in France is illustrated by the name of Alfred Jarry and which hovers over the origins of Surrealism under the influence of Jacques Vaché and Marcel Duchamp. (Breton 1936b, p. 661)

Breton sees objective humour as an important element of surrealism, reiterating these ideas in his 1966 *Anthology of Black Humour* (1966/1997). We can consider the 1936 exhibition and the accompanying publications as an attempt to outline the surrealist aspects of English culture rather than an attempt to establish surrealism in English culture.

According to Remy, Jennings was an important figure in “building a cultural bridge” (Remy 1999, p. 50) that allowed the introduction of modernist ideas to Britain. He was a student of English literature at Cambridge where he was involved with the *Experiment* group along with Julian Trevelyan and Hugh Sykes Davies.

As one of the few in Cambridge who painted, he had played a central role in the *Experiment* circle, introducing its members to French contemporary art and *Cahiers d'Art*. (Remy 1999, p. 50)

Jennings claims to have been aware of the early surrealist journals at the time of their publication (Jackson 2004, p. 164). His interest in surrealism and literature and his connections with the French surrealists were developed in 1931 when he spent time in Paris but his first surrealist influenced works were a number of prose-poem reports written in 1934 and 1935. Jennings also appears to have had a key role in the organisation of the 1936 exhibition, being described as one of “the inner quartet of E.L.T. Mesens, Penrose, Breton and Jennings” (Jackson 2004, p. 168). He was asked to approach the London Film Society in an attempt to encourage them to supply films for the exhibition. He also exhibited six of his own works and read some of his own texts alongside his translations of works by other surrealist writers. The exhibition was well publicised and raised the profile of surrealism in Britain by a range of means. Partly through unintentional controversies such as the seizing by customs of eight oil paintings bound from Copenhagen for the London exhibition; “Customs Officers at the Port of London

took exception to two of the paintings, and informed the organizers of the exhibition that they intended to destroy the whole case” (*The Times* 1936, p. 14). Other controversies include the near suffocation of Dalí as he attempted to give a lecture from inside a diving suit. The “provocative antics” (Jackson 2004, p. 170) associated with the exhibition led to press coverage that “tended to the jocular or splenetic” (Jackson 2004, p. 171). It seems to be the general opinion in contemporary newspapers that the real interest in the exhibition was to be found in the “well-stocked bookstall” (*The Times* 1936, p. 14) and the series of lectures delivered during the course of the show and that “In its present stage of development Surrealism is more interesting when written or talked about than in practice” (*The Times* 1936, p. 14).

The 1936 exhibition not only brought surrealism to the attention of the general public in Britain, it also facilitated the formation of a surrealist group from a number of disparate artists who may have had different interests in the surrealist project but all of whom were engaged in aligning their practice with a general international socialist movement that was developing in response to the tide of fascism that was engulfing Europe. The reasons for the establishment of The Surrealist Group in England are outlined in a statement published in *The International Surrealist Bulletin* in 1936 (quoted in Matheson 2006, pp. 653 - 655). The statement positions the English group alongside the established groups in France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Scandinavia and Japan, insisting that surrealism is not restricted to 1920s Paris and outlining how “the general character of the English imagination has been very much in the direction of



Surrealism” (quoted in Matheson 2006, p. 654). The bulk of the statement titled *The Situation in England, The Intellectual Position with Regard to Surrealism; The Formation of an English Group; Immediate Activities*, is concerned with how individualism, capitalism and Empire mitigate against the establishment of an English Surrealist group. The threat of a nascent Fascism in the government of England is seen as real and there is a concern that “the movement of our government towards fascism threatens to put a stop to all creative activity” (quoted in Matheson 2006, p. 655). In discussing entrenched individualism in England, the statement also addresses some of the paradoxes of surrealism “at present individualism prevents us from uniting in defence of the individual” (quoted in Matheson 2006, p. 654). The statement suggests that the problem of individualism is peculiar to the situation in England and that the solution to this problem will be arrived at through coherent local or national activity “reinforced by the achievements of Surrealism in all countries and on every front” (quoted in Matheson 2006, p. 655).

The work selected for the London exhibition was drawn from 69 artists, 27 of whom were British and, as there was no pre-existing surrealist group in Britain, the decision as to who should be included was left to Roland Penrose and Herbert Read’s judgement. The resulting 27 British artists were therefore not necessarily surrealists and were working in a broad range of mostly abstract styles. Some, such as John Selby Bigge had been members of Nash’s *Unit One* group, whilst others, such as Graham Sutherland were ideologically ill-suited to be associated with surrealism. As Remy has pointed out (1999, pp. 85 - 94), one of Nash and

Read's most interesting selections was the inclusion of work by Grace Pailthorpe and Reuben Mednikoff, whose work "was a major revelation for André Breton at the exhibition" (Remy 1999, p. 85). Breton's main contribution to the 1936 exhibition was the lecture that he gave under the title *Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism*. This lecture was published as an essay in Herbert Read's *Surrealism* (1936a) and was "important in shaping the understanding of Surrealism for an English audience" (Matheson 2006, p. 660). The works that Jennings showed in the International Exhibition included collages, paintings and found objects. His visual works of this period can be split into three broad categories. Firstly there are series of observational paintings and drawings such as the oil on canvas sketch *Child's Head* (1936). Secondly there are image-object or collage works such as *Life and Death* (1934) where two printed images are juxtaposed on a single card as if two frames from a film. The third category of work from this period is a series of paintings and sketches that explore symbolic subjects such as *Quixotic Personnage* (1936).

#### Mass-Observation, Romanticism and Surrealism

The establishment of the Surrealist Group in England and the accompanying attempts to define surrealism for the English led to a number of arguments, the first of which was sparked by Herbert Read's introduction to *Surrealism* (1936a) and by Humphrey Jennings's assertive critique of Read's ideas (Jennings 1936). Although Read's introduction to the book sees surrealism as an organism rather than an organisation and asserts that "It would therefore be contrary to the nature

of the movement to present, as some have suggested, a specifically English edition of surrealism.” (Read 1936a, p. 20). He goes on to investigate the sources of surrealism in an English context and it is the conclusions that he draws that upset Jennings. Read argues that “Superrealism in general is the romantic principle in art” (Read 1936a, p. 21) going on to develop the idea that romanticism was a pre-freudian and pre-marxian form of surrealism; that “Surrealism is a reaffirmation of the romantic principle” and “it is only now with the aid of modern dialectics and modern psychology” that artists have the scientific basis for the “inspirational and obsessional nature of their gifts” (Read 1936a, p. 28). Harris identifies this approach to literature in Read’s earlier anthology *The English Vision* (1933) as “profoundly nostalgic” (Harris 2010, p. 159). This parallels Jennings’s criticism of Sykes Davies and Read’s approach in *Surrealism* in that he argues they write on surrealism as “an excuse for another affirmation of their favourite theses: Mr Davies’ article becomes a lecture on Coleridge and Mr Read’s a defence of Romanticism.” (Jennings 1936, p. 219). In his cryptic conclusion to the review of Read’s book, Jennings appears to be disappointed in the direction that the Surrealist Group in England was taking - “But for the English to awaken from the sleep of selectivity, what a task. And to be already a ‘painter’, a ‘writer’, an ‘artist’, a ‘surrealist’, what a handicap” (Jennings 1936, p. 221). Jennings continues to be an active member of the group in the three years leading up to the outbreak of war, signing statements such as the 1936 Declaration on Spain and exhibiting at Mesens’s London Gallery. In 1938 he is involved (alongside Mesens and Arthur Elton) in organising *The Impact of the Machines*, an exhibition that parallels Jennings’s posthumously published

work on the effects of the industrial revolution, *Pandæmonium* (1985). His last contribution to Mesen's London Bulletin is *Two American Poems* in March 1939 but he continues to be a fairly inactive member of the group up until his expulsion in 1947 for accepting the OBE (Remy 1999, pp. 281 - 282). I would argue that Jennings's independence from the group, demonstrated in his critique of Read's attachment to Romanticism and his insistence on an engagement with concrete political and social issues, allies him more closely with the spirit of surrealism as articulated by Breton in his essay "What is Surrealism?" (1936a) than those who were more active in the group.

Remy identifies two political tendencies that developed in the months following the 1936 exhibition that can be seen as a manifestation of the second paradox (the coexistence of nationalism and internationalism). One was Read and Sykes Davies's "mildly *engagé* defence of surrealism as the continuation of romanticism" (Remy 1999, p. 103). Opposed to this was an increased internationalist political awareness amongst artists, concentrated mainly in opposition to the Fascists in Spain. The Surrealist Group in England published a "Declaration on Spain" accusing the British government of "the crime of non-intervention" (Remy 1999, p. 105) and, in the years leading to the outbreak of World War 2, collaborated with a range of socialist organisations. The July 1936 edition of *Left Review* features a supplement on surrealism, including an article by Read entitled "Surrealism – the Dialectic of Art" in which he attacks Soviet social realism, "the Surrealists challenge, not only all bourgeois conceptions of art, but also the official Soviet doctrine of socialist realism" (Read 1936b, p.ii). Read's brief

article makes no explicit reference to romanticism and is, in the main, a reiteration of Breton's assertions in "Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism" "We therefore reject as *erroneous* the conception of '*socialist realism*'" (Breton 1936b, p. 662). In its internationalist approach, the *Left Review* supplement tends to anticipate the ideas expressed by André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky in the establishment of FIARI (the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art) and their 1938 manifesto: *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*.

In 1936 Jennings also engaged with the third paradox (individual expression through the abdication of the individual) through the establishment, along with Charles Madge, David Gascoyne and Stuart Legg, of the Mass-Observation group. It could be considered that Madge, Gascoyne and Jennings set up the organisation as analogous to the Parisian Bureau of Surrealist Research and antithetical to Read's notion of surrealism as a new form of romanticism. Remy asserts that "Mass Observation cannot be seen as an offshoot of surrealism" (1999 p. 102) and, although this is accurate in terms of the established apolitical sociological research movement that Mass-Observation soon became, in the period with which Jennings was involved, the movement can perhaps be seen to at least have developed from surrealism. The idea for the Mass-Observation organisation grew from a series of meetings held between 1935 and 1936 at Charles Madge and Kathleen Raine's home in Blackheath, London. It was at these meetings that the hosts, along with Jennings, Gascoyne and Stuart Legg held long discussions about "surrealism, Blake, the industrial revolution, Freud, the relationship between art and science, 'mass wish-situations', and the phenomenon of coincidence, which

Jennings saw as key to human behavior” (Hodgkinson & Sheratsky 1982, p. 34). It was the publication in the *New Statesman* in December 1936 of a letter from Geoffrey Pike calling for an “anthropological study of our own civilization” (Hodgkinson & Sheratsky 1982, p. 35) that led Madge and Jennings to establish the Mass-Observation movement and, within a few months, the organisation had in excess of a thousand voluntary observers. The manifesto-letter that established the movement included a list of examples that seems inspired by surrealist poetic imagery and concludes by asserting that the observations gathered are intended to allow all observers to understand and thereby transform their environment as can be seen in the extract below:

The foisting on the mass of ideals or ideas developed by men apart from it, irrespective of its capacities, causes mass misery, intellectual despair and an international shambles. (Jackson 2004, p. 105)

This combination of surreal poetics and political action was short-lived, Jennings argued with Harrison and left the organisation in 1938, but Jennings’s involvement with the Mass-Observation movement led to the creation of some interesting texts and images and to Jennings’s film *Spare Time* (1939). *Spare Time* has been called Jennings’s Mass-Observation film (Lovell & Hillier 1972, p. 71) and is the result of his engagement with a range of issues relating to surrealist thought. There is an emphasis in the film on the observation of the rituals of everyday life, outmoded pastimes and popular culture filmed in part with a detached camera style that parallels Eugene Atget’s photographs. The film is also interesting in that it counters some of Richardson’s criticisms of Jennings, firstly

it was not produced by John Grierson but by Brazilian émigré Alberto Cavalcanti, who was more interested in experimental work than Grierson; secondly it was not produced for specific propaganda purposes in times of war and thirdly, far from demonstrating a romantic attachment to landscape and nation, the film was criticised for its cold, distanced approach to its subject matter (most likely the result of Jennings's engagement with the ideas of the Mass-Observation group). Richardson is aware of these points and notes that *Spare Time* is "probably his most interesting from a surrealist point of view" (Richardson 2006, p. 86). As Richardson also points out, it is difficult to assess how Jennings work might have progressed if he had been able to continue to make films without the exigencies of wartime propaganda.

The period from 1938 – 1940 is defined by Remy as "the years of definition" (1999 pp. 147 - 166) as it was in this period that the Surrealist Group in England attempted to consolidate its position. The work of the group centered on the activities organised at the London Gallery in Cork Street, under the direction of Belgian surrealist E.L.T. Mesens. During this period, works by European émigré artists were shown in the gallery as well as exhibitions by English surrealists including Jennings. The concerns of the English group, as seen in their exhibitions and publications of the period, contrasted with the urban character of Parisian surrealism, absorbing earlier concerns of English modernism and the English tradition, particularly explorations of natural forms in an attempt to express the "latent content" (Breton 1936b, p. 661) of the age. Alongside the "central role of nature" (Matheson 2006, p. 666) in the developing definition of English

surrealism, the English group became involved with internationalism in their political activities. Mesens and Penrose coordinated the exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica* at the Whitechapel gallery in 1938 and the role of art in the fight against fascism was emphasised through a series of surrealist-led exhibitions. During this period a number of new artists based in England such as Conroy Maddox and Ithell Colquhoun exhibited at the London Gallery whilst others, who had exhibited at the 1936 show but had demonstrated less attachment to surrealist ideas, moved away from the group. For pragmatic reasons, the surrealists in England, rather than sign up to Breton's specifically Trotskyite FIARI group, aligned themselves with a more broad-based socialist grouping; the Artists' International Association (AIA) and, by 1938, were moving away from engagement with the London West End art establishment towards more direct political action. The English surrealists organised travelling exhibitions and moved beyond the gallery to participate in marches and demonstrations. The political activities of the English group culminated, around the time of the 1938 Munich crisis, with a march in Hyde Park protesting against Chamberlain's policy of appeasement followed by a large AIA touring exhibition *United Front*. By 1939 a split in the leadership of the English group had opened with Mesens and others (including Penrose) criticising and marginalising Read for his collaboration with Peggy Guggenheim on a proposal to found a Museum of Modern Art in London. Although the members of the Surrealist Group in England remained convinced of the emancipatory power of surrealism, the outbreak of war led to a virtual dissolution of the group as individual artists were called up to a range of wartime activities. Mesens attempted to radicalise the English Surrealists who, in



the main took a more pragmatic approach to wartime activities. Throughout these “years of definition” (Remy 1999, p. 147) Jennings was at the eye of the surrealist storm; he exhibited at the London gallery, signed declarations and letters and, through his Mass-Observation work, spread surrealism in Britain beyond the West End of London. During this period he also broadcast on poetry for the BBC and directed some of his first films. Some of Jennings’s most interesting art works of the time evolve from his work in Bolton produced as a result of the Mass-Observation project.

Alongside his art and Mass-Observation work, he was also tied to the political machinations of the English surrealist group through his private life and his regular attendance at meetings of the group held at Roland Penrose’s house in Hampstead. These ties include a romantic involvement with Peggy Guggenheim that demonstrates his movement amongst the circle of surrealist celebrities; on a trip to Paris to meet Guggenheim, he introduced her to André Breton and she introduced him to Marcel Duchamp (see Jackson 2004, pp. 196 - 199). Although he was a key player in the English group, Jennings appears to doubt the radical nature of the group’s surrealism. This is evident in the months following the 1936 show and illustrated by the following entry from Gascoyne’s journal.

Roughton and Jennings suggested that for various reasons the group should disband itself, which the group, presided over by a surprisingly astringent [Herbert] Read, indignantly refused to do... Presently Humphrey... announced in tones of furious, long-tried patience: ‘Well, now I’d like to read you a few lines of *Lenin* on the subject’, and read a long passage from Lenin on dreams, implying that the dreams of those

present were of the kind that fly off at a tangent and are of no service to the 'toiling masses of humanity' – a phrase that he continued to use for the rest of the evening. (quoted in Jackson 2004, p. 191)

In 1940, the GPO Film Unit becomes part of the Propaganda arm of the British state, under the control of the Ministry of Information and is renamed the Crown Film Unit. Although he still attends important meetings of the Surrealist Group in England, Jennings's time is taken up with his work for the Crown Film Unit. With the threat of a German invasion growing and in order to actively support the war against Fascism, Jennings's interests become less with the occultation of surrealism than with the ideas that had evolved from his engagement with surrealism and Mass-Observation. Jennings was not alone amongst the English surrealists in joining the war effort: Penrose was appointed as a night warden before being enlisted, along with Trevelyan, to develop camouflage designs for the Home Guard. Mesens, who had effectively been leader of the English group, took a job with the BBC, broadcasting propaganda to Belgium. He had closed the London Gallery soon after the outbreak of war and publication of the London Bulletin ceased in 1940. Other members of the group served in the Royal Air Force, as auxiliary coastguards and air raid wardens. Of those who weren't enlisted others such as Onslow-Ford left for the United States of America where Breton and others were now based. In Paris the surrealist group buckled under the pressure of Nazi occupation, in Prague the movement operated underground, whilst in Egypt a brief flourishing of the surrealist group was tolerated mainly due to its anti-fascist ideology.

With Jennings and the majority of the Surrealist Group in England now working on other matters, a vacuum formed in the leadership of the group that led to the emergence of Toni del Renzio: a Russo-Italian émigré newly arrived from Paris, and the artist who would attempt to redefine the group in the wartime context. Whilst Jennings was exploring the “deep reflexes and conscious preoccupations of his fellow countrymen” (Remy 1999, p. 217) through films such as *Heart of Britain* (Jennings, 1941), del Renzio arrived in Britain seeing surrealism as “the perfect vehicle for what had become a conscious revolt against British intellectual and literary cliques.” (Levy 2005, p. 3). The split in the group and the repercussions of del Renzio’s argument (expressed in retrospect) that “War or no war, there was nothing being done about Surrealism. Hitler had to be defeated, yes, but Surrealism also had to carry on.” (quoted in Levy 2005, p. 5) raise questions about Jennings’s relationship to the Surrealist Group in England during the Second World War and in the following years. The divisions in the group sparked by del Renzio’s activities are explored in some detail by Levy (2005, pp. 1 - 34) and Remy (1999, pp. 219 - 228) and, as Jennings was by all accounts relatively divorced from the activities, the most effective way to explore the relationship between the fall-out from these arguments and later considerations of the relationship between Jennings and surrealism might be to consider Jennings’s work in relation to the three paradoxes identified above.

#### Jennings’s Films and the Three Paradoxes.

In terms of British surrealism, the first paradox (that surrealism is placeless and timeless yet born at a specific place and time) is evident in the historical position

of the English group. The group was established in the ominous atmosphere of the build up to World War 2 and the work of the group is inevitably tied to the historical events of this period, particularly the Blitz that wreaked havoc on British cities between 1940 and 1941. It has been noted that, at the time, “the ‘surrealism’ of the blitz was widely remarked” (Walker 2007, p. 139) and this is evident in the work of photographers, most noticeably in Lee Miller’s images of bombed London. It was during this period that all of the elements of British culture that were dear to Jennings, Penrose and Read came under threat. The liminality of a society and culture on the verge of destruction chimes not only with the imagery of surrealist painting but also with surrealist literature in which “matter becomes metaphor; the ordinary object becomes extraordinary” (Rabinovitch 2002, p. 4) and in which transformation from one state to another is held perpetually in check. Jennings’s film that best illustrates this first paradox is *Listen To Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942). It is a film that describes a particular point in British history: a Mass-Observation style portrait of a single day in wartime Britain. It merges popular and classical culture, creating an impression of timelessness - a portrait of an eternal national character, a mythopoeic construction created through the use of realist techniques and a poetic montage style. Gavin Lambert argues that: “the technique of *Listen to Britain* is based completely on the power of association” its power comes from its affectionate representations of ordinary people “without a trace of patronage or caricature” (Lambert 1951, p. 25).

A film that illustrates the second paradox (the coexistence of nationalism and internationalism) is *Words For Battle* (1941). The film demonstrates Jennings's surrealist-influenced modernism in its collaged non-narrative form and its avoidance of causality. Its nationalism is announced in the opening shots of white cliffs and ploughed fields. The film opens with a sequence rooted in the landscape of England, a cinematic parallel to David Gascoyne's pre-war *Poem II* that opens with the line "It is well-nigh impossible to describe the natural beauty of this country" (Gascoyne 1936, p. 666). The film's use of passages from English literature echoes the argument of Madge that an English form of surrealism will require writers to have "a knowledge of their own language and literature" (Madge 1933, p. 14). The well-known passages from Milton, Blake and Kipling emphasise a mythical English solidarity that grows from the land and surrounding sea. The nationalist verve of the film is tempered by a feeling of reluctance, an impression that the English, in Kipling's words, stoically "began to hate" because of the Nazis' arrogance (seen in stock newsreel footage). The film ends with an appeal to Britain's Empire and to the New World to intervene in order to ensure "government of the people by the people". The film expounds a particular vision of a British nationalist ideology before disclosing the international nature of these British values that the world will fight to protect in the face of fascism. When considered in the light of Britain's colonial past, this appeal seems at odds with surrealist internationalism but Jennings's films, produced for the Ministry of Information in wartime cannot easily escape compromise.

The third paradox (individual expression through the abdication of the individual) is perhaps best illustrated by *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943). The film is a dramatised exploration of the results of the imagined Nazi occupation of a small Welsh mining village. Although it shares the liminal nature of his other wartime films in that the imminent occupation of Britain was a real possibility at the time, the film is also a reimagining of a recent historical event: the occupation, and subsequent destruction by the Nazis, of Lidice, a Czech mining village. The film allows the non-professional actors, who are miners living in a village similar to Lidice, to abdicate their own experience whilst reflecting on it through techniques of association. Jennings lived in the village prior to and during the filming in order to create a synthesis of Mass-Observation, improvised reconstruction and political propaganda. *The Silent Village* is an individual expression by Jennings's as an auteur who allows the actors to re-examine their own lives through an act of speculative fiction.

Although none of the above three films could be considered overtly surrealist works, they contain, as Richardson has identified, elements of surrealism: "As it is, he gave us a handful of great films in which surrealism is not a negligible factor, but it is only a factor." (Richardson 2006, p. 86). Andrew Spicer supports this appraisal of Jennings in his argument that "Surrealism in British cinema rarely manifests itself explicitly; rather it forms an element within particular films." (Spicer 2007, pp. 102 - 103). It is the nature of these elements that I will attempt to tease from the films in subsequent chapters. I will finally briefly suggest how

these factors have recurred in the work of subsequent filmmakers, considering possible further areas of study that may develop from this.

In its own way, British surrealism has opened territories alien to our personal worlds, yet close to our most intimate selves. This is not surprising, for the images liberated by Eileen Agar, Humphrey Jennings, Conroy Maddox, Emmy Bridgewater, Edith Rimmington, John Welson, Philip West, John Banting, Reuben Mednikoff, Grace Pailthorpe, and many others, have only one demiurge: desire – our desire which each one of these artists has aimed at opening and expanding. (Remy 1999, p. 342)

It may not be immediately obvious how Jennings's films can be said to be "aimed at opening and expanding" (Remy 1999, p. 342) our desire. Perhaps this is because they deal with the intimate relationship between the concrete world and the self through addressing ideas around history, community, nationalism, landscape and society. Jennings's films, particularly those made as part of the War effort, address the audience's desire for liberty and community by reflecting their experience back at them, opening and expanding their desires in order to reveal the symbolic significance of the everyday.

Jennings's post-war work appears to relate less to surrealism than do his wartime films. The post war mood of austerity had neither the threat nor enthusiasm of the immediate pre-war period from which English surrealism evolved. Jennings's final film was produced for the 1951 Festival of Britain, an event that combines elements of modernist internationalism with a muddled romantic depiction of British nationalism. The Festival looks backwards to tradition in its exploration of

country life and British craftsmen and forwards to cinematic technological developments. This can be seen in the official catalogue published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) that describes the presentation of "three-dimensional sound pictures" (HMSO 1951, p. 176). The Festival's exhibits reflect an attempt to define the people of Britain and the national character while Jennings's film is an unconvincing portrait of the nation, that attempts to meet the Festival's brief whilst articulating the themes that he had been researching for *Pandaemonium* (Jennings, 1985). According to the official government catalogue, the festival is "one united act of national reassessment and one corporate reaffirmation of faith in the nation's future." (HMSO 1951, p. 11). In many ways, however, the national character has refused to be effectively reassessed in the intervening years and remains suspended in the uncanny imagery of the wartime threshold constructed by Jennings's films. It is difficult to reconcile the contradictions inherent in Jennings's film work whilst attempting to justify his surrealism. Roland Penrose attempted to characterise Jennings's surrealism in an interview cited in Jackson's biography.

...there was this curious nationalist, patriotic side in Humphrey, which from the purely surrealist point of view was rather shocking. But from Humphrey's point of view it added certainly a genuine feeling of activity and a sort of solidarity between England, which he loved, and the whole revolutionary attitude which surrealism stood for. (Jackson 2004, p. 178)

Another attempt to describe Jennings's surrealism is outlined by Paul Ray, which may be the most useful definition in considering how his films may operate as surrealist texts.



Jennings seems, then, to be turning surrealism upside down: he finds in the real, concrete object an image of the collective imagination; the surrealist, on the other hand, finds in his imagination (i.e., when he is in a state of automatism) an image which he seeks to concretize in the external world, in a painting, a poem or an object. (Ray 1971, p. 180)

Surrealism in Britain is probably most aptly described by Remy's phrase, as "the search for a fading prospect" (Remy 1999, p. 327). Following the closure of the Mayor gallery in 1950, existing and new surrealist groups developed variously in Birmingham, Leeds and London but remained marginal to the wider art world. The difficulties in defining British surrealism are evident in recent exhibitions such as *Another World* (July 2010 – January 2011, Dean Gallery, Edinburgh). In the exhibition's timeline, surrealism in Britain ends in 1951 when the London Gallery closes. To paraphrase Nicholas Royle (Royle 2003, p. 97): Perhaps we should question whether we could be certain that there has ever been an English surrealism? Rather than consider it as a cultural and aesthetic 'phenomenon' that haunted England between 1936 and 1950, or even a still active 'movement', we could suppose that surrealism remains a strange 'non-event' that still haunts the art and films of Britain and that Jennings's films are key to the existence of this phantom.

### Chapter 3: The Surrealist Factors in Humphrey Jennings's Films

In Chapter 2 I have argued that the enigmatic nature of surrealism allows the movement to develop specific national identities; to be formulated in and associated with a particular time and place. With this in mind, we should consider that Humphrey Jennings's films are key to any attempt to define a specifically British surrealist tendency in British cinema. Jennings's interest in the collective imagination of Britain and his position as the archetypal mythopoeic British filmmaker of World War Two, ensure his place as a touchstone for any consideration of the relationship between surrealist ideas and British cinema. In order to tease out the surrealist factors of his films I will first briefly outline an appropriate definition of surrealism and surrealist cinema. I will then define the ways in which Jennings's films operate as surrealist texts; this will allow me to identify these tendencies in the work of subsequent filmmakers.

I will begin by examining the way in which surrealism was defined in 1936 when it first arrived in England and when Jennings was most clearly associated with the movement. In 1936 an edition of the *Criterion Miscellany* entitled *What is Surrealism?* (Breton 1936a) is published to coincide with the International Surrealist Exhibition. In this publication, which is an offshoot of T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* journal (1922 – 1939), David Gascoyne translates a series of essays by André Breton. The titular essay is translated from a pamphlet issued in 1934 following a lecture that Breton gave to the Belgian surrealists in Brussels. The essay is a statement on the current position of surrealism at the time of the London

exhibition and, as such, has a clear connection to Jennings's work via the first paradox outlined in chapter two (that surrealism is placeless and timeless yet born in a specific place and time). For the Parisian surrealist movement, the years 1934 and 1935 saw a deepening political engagement and increased attempts to develop a broader international surrealist movement. Jennings directed his first film in 1934 and published his first surrealist writings in the same year. As this is a decade after the publication of the first surrealist manifesto, we have to consider that from its inception, surrealism in England is more closely allied to this politicised approach rather than to the more intuitive surrealist explorations of the 1920s.

Breton's 1934 essay emphasises the importance to surrealism of the dialogue between internal and external realities. The interior and exterior realities are described as "two elements in the process of unification" (Breton 1936a, p. 49). In this process of becoming, surrealist practice involves the observation of the "reciprocal attraction and interpenetration" (Breton 1936a, p. 50) of these two realities. Breton describes the first epoch of surrealism as a "purely *intuitive* epoch" (Breton 1936a, p. 50) where surrealist activity, in the form of automatic texts, dream recitals and spontaneous activities, is seen as an end in itself. Breton explains how the second "*reasoning*" (Breton 1936a, p. 50) epoch developed in 1925, in response to the outbreak of the Moroccan war and how the living surrealist movement has to respond to historical contingencies.

The essential is always to look ahead, to remain sure that one has not forfeited the burning desire for beauty, truth and justice, toilingly to go

onwards towards the discovery, one by one, of *fresh landscapes*, and to continue doing so indefinitely and without coercion to the end, that others may afterwards travel the same spiritual road, unhindered and in all security. (Breton 1936a, p. 53)

Breton concludes by clearly linking surrealist practice to the fight against armed fascism. This should be seen in the context of the French parliamentary crisis of 6<sup>th</sup> February 1934 where far-right political groups had taken to the streets in an attempt to bring about a fascist coup d'état. The surrealist's response was to help form an anti-fascist "Committee of Intellectual Vigilance" (Nadeau 1968, p. 192).

Let it be clearly understood that for us, surrealists, the interests of thought cannot cease to go hand in hand with the interests of the working class, and that all attacks on liberty, all fetters on the emancipation of the working class and all armed attacks on it cannot fail to be considered by us as attacks on thought likewise. (Breton 1936a, p. 90)

It is also possible to consider Jennings's films as occupying two distinct epochs that parallel Breton's description of the development of surrealism mentioned above. Jennings's films produced prior to 1939 in the immediate run-up to World War Two are more intuitive, in that he was developing his film style on a relatively instinctive level; responding spontaneously to commercial or government projects that were produced as collaborative works within a fairly regimented environment. In letters of the time written by Jennings to his wife he appears less interested in film as a medium and more concerned with other issues. His new job at the GPO Film Unit appears to have been taken as a financial necessity. Although he sees the new job as "very exhilarating stuff" (Jennings

1934, p. 4), he hopes that “this plunge into the world won’t swamp everything” (Jennings 1934, p. 3). The films that Jennings directs between 1934 and 1939 are made in this atmosphere of improvisation and necessity; varied in their style, subject and authorial input. In some of these early films we see Jennings use the medium in a workmanlike manner to deal with subjects that engage him, in other films we can see individual compositions, elements or juxtapositions that prefigure elements of his wartime output. Overall, Jennings’s films leading up to *Spare Time* (1939) are experiments with film form in which he attempts to smuggle his interests (in the history of technology, the collective consciousness, surrealism and poetic lyricism) into commercial and institutional film projects.

As war advances, we can see Jennings taking a more engaged approach to film work that parallels Breton’s second “reasoning” (Breton 1936a, p. 50) epoch in that it now has a more urgent social necessity. Jennings’s use of film as propaganda post 1939 can be read in the light of Breton’s statements as a surrealist act. Although Richardson describes the notion that Jennings’s films were produced as “contributions to the British war effort” and were therefore “in conflict with fundamental surrealist principles” (Richardson 2006, p. 86), in its support and sympathy for the interests of the working class and its foregrounding of a non-specific internationalist ideology through a poetic approach, his work stands in stark contrast to the works of wartime propaganda produced in Germany and America. Granted, there may be a substantial element of compromise in producing films as propaganda but the idea that they are informed by surrealism and contain surreal factors are notions that are examined further below.

### Humphrey Jennings's Films and Surrealism

In his introduction to *The Shadow and its Shadow* (1978) Paul Hammond explores the relationship between surrealism and cinema, emphasising the poetic bias of surrealist film and considering surrealist approaches to film spectatorship and interpretation. Hammond examines how commercial narrative cinema may manifest surreality through either a subversion of narrative conventions or through the expression of “an *ethic* comparable with surrealism” (Hammond 1978, p. 3). These notions open up Jennings's documentaries to a surrealist interpretation as works that are either poetic in their attempt to grasp reality imaginatively, for example *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942), or are attempts to subvert the conventions of the documentary form through an imaginative reconstruction of reality, for example *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) and *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943). A further surrealist critical approach to cinema that Hammond identifies is “synthetic criticism” (Hammond 1978, p. 5), an approach to reading a film that stresses the latent or accidental content of a work. Synthetic criticism involves the identification of individual sequences that have a “poetic charge” (Hammond 1978, p. 5) that is amplified when the sequence is studied in isolation.

This approach to Jennings's work becomes more complex when we consider his conscious knowledge of and involvement with the surrealist movement. We cannot assume that moments of surrealism in Jennings's films are accidental and should instead consider the surrealist elements of his films as a series of strata laid

down by Jennings the artist, poet and filmmaker. In the earlier films of Jennings's "intuitive epoch" (Breton 1936a, p. 50), we can find isolated scenes or sequences that have a poetic resonance. In Nichols's schema, these can be considered poetic documentaries in the way that they explore patterns and associations through temporal rhythms and special juxtapositions. This poetic approach develops from Jennings's engagement with the modernist avant-garde, specifically, his involvement with surrealism. These are films concerning relatively routine topics yet they are structured poetically and contain surreal moments, and it is to these films that we should apply the synthetic critical approach. In his wartime films, we can identify a "reasoning" (Breton 1936a, p. 50) approach as Jennings attempts to create more accomplished poetic works that confront the attacks on liberty and the working classes of Britain. Alongside the identification of these poetically charged moments in his films, we should consider to what extent these later works are ethically surrealist.

We can see the intertwining of Jennings's film production with his artistic, historical and political interests in later letters written to his wife. In the opening paragraph of a letter dated 1941, he breathlessly describes the final editing of *Listen to Britain* (1942), meetings with surrealist writers such as George Reavey, André Breton's arrival in New York and the current political situation in the USSR.

In the meantime we are working harder than ever... *Listen to Britain* is the music film I mentioned I think. Two reels – no commentary – highspots Flanagan and Allen and Myra Hess playing Mozart. Saw George [Reavey,

the surrealist writer] and Gwyneth [his wife] the other night back from Spain... I hear [André] Breton is in New York. (Jennings 1941, p. 36)

This absorption of filmmaking into the heart of his interests stands in contrast to the more tentative discussions of film in his earlier letters. This supports the argument that we should take a synthetic critical approach to his films prior to 1939 (i.e. we should attempt to identify individual sequences that have a “poetic charge” [Hammond 1978, p. 5]) and a closer examination of his later films as works in which he directly attempts to apply a surrealist sensibility to documentary material.

In order to explore Jennings’s wartime films as surrealist texts we will need to extend our earlier discussions of the nature of surrealist practice to specifically address the relationship between surrealism and film. The difficulties in defining surrealism discussed in earlier chapters may be overcome if we instead attempt to define surrealist artifacts, in this case to interrogate the nature of surrealist films. David Bate (2004) has attempted to define surrealist photography and some of his strategies are equally useful in attempting to answer the question “what is a surrealist film?” Bate proposes three broad categories as a means by which to discuss the signifying functions of photographs in relation to surrealism. These categories are “1. Mimetic; 2. Prophotographic; 3. Enigmatic.” (Bate 2004, p. 22). These categories allow us to discuss photographs used for conventional illustrative purposes such as to record a meeting of surrealists (mimetic); photographs used to reproduce an object or situation that “is already surreal prior to being photographed” (Bate 2004, p. 25) (prophotographic); and photographs



where the meaning is no longer clear, where “what is being communicated, ‘signified’, is not clear” (Bate 2004, p. 29) (enigmatic). Bate argues that these categories “all have potential for enigmatic/surreal effects... because surrealism as a discursive practice is a mode of treating signs, rather than any essential particular type of sign” (Bate 2004, p. 29). This notion reiterates Gascoyne’s assertion that “Surrealism is *not* a school of literature or painting, it is *not* a system of aesthetics.” (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 25). The surrealist mode of treating signs concerns the dialectical reconciliation of perception and representation in an on-going attempt to initiate a response in the historical world. This parallels Nichol’s poetic mode as a mode of treating documentary material rather than a specific technical praxis.

Bate’s categories also parallel the surrealist interpretation of cinema by writers such as Ado Kyrrou. Kyrrou explains how the surrealist approach to film does not involve viewing or creating a particular type of film, the surrealist approach is rather to transform film and “from its given elements make it *my thing*, draw snippets of knowledge from it and see better into myself” (Kyrrou 1963, p. 81). He compares the surrealist reading of a film to Duchamp’s use of the ready-made object; Kyrrou’s subjective reading of a film as surrealist that involves, among other things, “a feeling of *déjà-vu*” (Kyrrou 1963, p. 81) which could only be objectified by an interpretive intervention such as the isolation or re-editing of a sequence. Kyrrou argues that there are not particular effects or images that are inherently surrealist rather that films should be seized upon as “sources of illumination” that can “shed light on shadowy regions” (Kyrrou 1963, pp. 82 - 83).

Richardson is also wary of the commonly used notion of “surreal effects” (Bate 2004, p. 29) where the term becomes interchangeable with “bizarre” (Richardson 2006, p. 2). He asserts that “If ‘surrealism’ can be said to ‘exist’ at all it is in the tension that exists between the activities of the surrealists and the fundamental principles of surrealism as it has historically unfolded” (Richardson 2006, p. 3). Jennings’s films are indicative of this tension in that they exist somewhere between the fundamental principles of surrealism (for example, the interrogation of reality and the desire for liberty) and the historical position of surrealism around the time of the Second World War. Jennings’s films develop from his engagement with the surrealists and are an element of the historical development of surrealism: where some surrealists moved to New York for the duration of the war, others stayed in Paris under the Nazi occupation. Those associated with British surrealism joined the war against Fascism in a range of ways; some designed camouflage (Paul Nash), others worked as war photographers (Lee Miller) and Jennings worked for the Crown Film Unit – this wartime activity is one example of the tension between the fundamental principles of surrealism and the historical circumstances (or historical unfolding) in which the surrealists found themselves. Jennings’s engagement with the “set of ideas” (Richardson 2006, p. 13) that constitute the historical development of surrealism take shape in his films at a particular historical moment. It is not easy to pin down exactly what the collection of ideas that Richardson alludes to may be but he clearly identifies surrealism as a collective endeavor that responds to historical events. Richardson and Fijalkowski offer a quote from André Masson as a definition of the collective

nature of surrealism: “the collective experience of individualism” (Fijalkowski & Richardson 2001, p. 1). This notion seems apposite in discussing Jennings’s wartime film work as his films take the collective experience of war as their subject matter and represent the British population as individuals rather than stereotypical types.

As Ray has identified (1971, p. 180), Jennings’s approach to filmmaking turns surrealism on its head. Rather than attempting to extract and concretise archetypal images from his subconscious, Jennings searches out objects and scenes from the concrete, external world of wartime Britain and creates archetypal symbols from the everyday. Breton asserts (1936a, pp. 49 - 50) that the dialogue between external and internal realities is crucial to an understanding of surrealist practice and that the unification of these two poles is one of the major goals of surrealism. As a result of this assertion that unification is the goal, it becomes inconsequential whether the artist is creating the symbolic from the concrete (as in documentary film or photography) or the concrete from the symbolic (as in paintings of dream imagery). As such, the enigmatic effect of Jennings’s films, particularly details and their symbolic effect is in need of exploration and analysis. As long as we have not “made the mistake of confusing the real and persistent mystery of his work with any miserable fake mysteries” (Breton 1936a, p. 32), we should be able to identify the surrealist factors in his films as those elements that turn the concrete into symbolic images of “the collective imagination” (Ray 1971, p. 180).

The notion that surrealism is not a style, and that there is no such thing as a surrealist film, has been articulated by a number of writers on the subject, most recently in terms of cinema by Michael Richardson. He argues that, not only is surrealism not a style, it is equally not a set of principles or attitudes and that “Surrealism can never be tied down to a thing; it is a relation between things” (Richardson 2006, p. 10). In considering Jennings’s films in relation to surrealism, I am not asserting that his films are surrealist texts, or indeed that there is such a thing as a surrealist film, but rather that they have a dialectical relationship with surrealism. This conversation between the historical development of surrealism and the films of Jennings takes the form of a thread that weaves through Jennings’s work, connecting his films to his other historical, creative and literary interests. The thread is picked up by subsequent filmmakers and can be traced through their work. This thread is delineated not only by Jennings as auteur but also by the historical contingencies of his wartime films: the experience of those who appear in them, the experience of viewing the films in a wartime cinema and the symbolic significance of the films in the following decades.

Breton’s essay on cinema “As in a Wood” (Breton 1951, pp. 235 - 240) does not concern itself with particular films but rather with the experience of cinema-going and the unrealized potential of cinema. Richardson reiterates this when writing “It is not film as such that is surrealist but cinema: the experience of seeing a film in a darkened hall” (Richardson 2006, p. 6). The notion that cinema has a surrealist potential was expressed by Jean Goudal in his essay “Surrealism and Cinema” (Goudal 1925). Written one year after the publication of the first *Manifesto of*

*Surrealism* (Breton 1924), Goudal's essay explores the experience of cinema as analogous to the experience of dreaming, identifying "three essential characteristics of the dream, the *visual*, the *illogical*, the *pervasive*." (Goudal 1925, p. 54). I would argue that Humphrey Jennings's films are imbued with these three characteristics of the dream in the following ways:

Firstly it is clear that Jennings's films are "VISUAL" (Goudal 1925, p. 54) in the importance given to the notion of film and art as a series of images. Although the soundtrack is important to Jennings's work, it is seldom synchronised sound that is used. In Jennings's films, particularly *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) the sound becomes an element of the poetic image. Jennings's use of the term "Image" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv) in the introduction to *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) is important in this regard, demonstrating how he sees the written texts that form the book as images. He foregrounds the visual by considering all textual, audio and visual records of events as generating images in the imagination of the reader, using film as the analogy that binds them. He describes the text images that make up *Pandæmonium* (1985) as microcosms:

...in little a whole world – they are the knots in a great net of tangled space and time – the moments at which the situation of humanity is clear – even if only for the flash time of the photographer or the lightning. And just as the usual history does not consist of isolated events, occurrences – so this 'imaginative history' does not consist of isolated images, but each is in a particular place in an unrolling film. (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv)

The above quote also hints at the second essential characteristic of the dream, “THE ILLOGICAL” (Goudal 1925, p. 54). In his introduction to *Pandæmonium* (1985) Jennings describes the extracts that form the book’s source material as moments of clarity in a “great net of tangled space and time” (1985, p. xxxv). His films are constructed from such moments of clarity assembled into patterns that avoid sentimentality. In Goudal’s terms sentimentality is “logic within the framework of feeling” (1925, p. 54). I would argue that although Jennings’s films do not have what Goudal describes as “an old-fashioned respect for logic” (1925, p. 54) neither are they entirely capricious; they have a structure that is designed to illuminate the imagination. His films are illogical in their juxtaposition of sound and image and in their foregrounding of everyday experience at times of crisis but they develop from Jennings’s notion of “imaginative history” (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv). The imagination that has formulated the films’ logic comes from Jennings’s application of surrealism’s “set of ideas” (Richardson 2006, p. 13) discussed earlier. *Spare Time* (Jennings, 1939), for example, is a representation of the results of the conflicts of Industrial Revolution in Britain, played out as a conflict between work time and leisure time.

The above example illustrates how the third essential characteristic of the dream, “THE PERVASIVE” (Goudal 1925, p. 54), is present in Jennings’s work. Jennings’s films are not attempts to map out a personal set of symbols or dream logic in cinematic form. As discussed previously, his approach to filmmaking has developed from surrealism as communicated through Mass-Observation. His films attempt to represent the social subconscious of Britain and the pervasiveness

of his works can be seen in their popularity at the time of production. It is also demonstrated in their mythopoeic nature and their subsequent pervasive influence on British filmmakers.

In the following detailed analyses of Jennings's films, alongside an exploration of the visual, illogical and pervasive nature of his works, I will be considering the works in relation to the three paradoxes outlined in the previous chapter. I aim to examine how Jennings turns concrete film and audio fragments into a set of personal symbolic images that represent the collective imagination or social subconscious of the nation. I will argue that the films of Jennings draw on the symbolism of the village to present an image of modern Britain during a key historical period and that this image parallels his imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985).

Having considered the work of Jennings in relation to documentary and surrealism in previous chapters, I will now consider three of his key films produced between 1939 and 1943 - *Spare Time* (Jennings, 1939), *Listen To Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942), *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) - in an attempt to explore their relationship to surrealist thought and practice. I intend to consider the historical development of Jennings's work and to explain why I consider these three films important to a surrealist reading of his oeuvre. I will carry out a close analysis of the films, attempting to objectify my subjective response to the works by drawing out key moments or "Images" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv) that appear to reflect surrealist concerns and exploring how Jennings's

treatment of the material can be read through the “discursive practice” (Bate 2004, p. 29) of surrealism. I will explore Jennings’s wartime films as a more cohesive body of work that contains clearly articulated surrealist images utilising narrative and poetic structures to specific aims. I will summarise the relationship between Jennings’s work and surrealism in order that the results may facilitate an exploration of the influence of Jennings’s surrealism on the work of subsequent filmmakers.

As a starting point, I will divide Jennings’s work into three strategic phases and explore three key films that emerge as the culmination of each phase. The initial phase of Jennings’s work runs from his first films as director in 1934 and culminates in *Spare Time* (1939). Although Jennings’s films of this early period utilise the expository documentary mode, they can also be considered to operate in the poetic mode. The expository mode is evident in their reliance on an illustrative spoken commentary to frame the films’ temporal rhythms. The poetic mode is present in ambiguous use of object/images discussed below. In terms of the three paradoxes outlined in chapter two, the works of this period engage with surrealism fairly tangentially: The first paradox (that surrealism is placeless and timeless, yet born in a specific place and time) can be seen in Jennings’s interest in the effects of the machine age on the psyche and in the way that these films deal with technology as part of a historical continuum. Although the films deal with contemporary subjects - such as the postal service, the fashion industry, merchant shipping and farming - each film places the contemporary in an impressionistic framework that stresses the timeless nature of human experience.



The second paradox (that surrealism is an international movement with distinct national identities) is evident in these films to the extent that they deal with international communication and technologies that have changed the world (such as the steam locomotive and international communications) but deal with these topics from a distinctly British perspective. The third paradox (individual freedom and the abdication of the individual) is present in the manner in which Jennings worked as an individual within the fairly regimented GPO Film Unit.

#### Jennings's films prior to *Spare Time* (1939)

Jennings directed his first films in 1934 as an employee of the GPO Film Unit. This was the same year that Alberto Cavalcanti joined the unit as a producer with a reputation as “something of an authority on the use of sound in the cinema” (Aitken 2000, p. 43). Although Grierson had a reputation as an “uncompromisingly serious Scottish film-maker, theorist, polemicist and teacher” (Jackson 2004, p. 133), he was also canny enough to employ talented artists from Europe. Jennings and Cavalcanti had both been involved with the avant-garde in Paris, Cavalcanti having directed *Nothing But the Hours* (*Rien que les heures*) in 1926 and, as mentioned earlier, Jennings had been involved with the introduction of modernist ideas to Britain via the Experiment group in Cambridge. Over the next few years, leading up to the outbreak of World War Two, Jennings and Cavalcanti were to form an alternative tradition within the imperious atmosphere of the Griersonian documentary school.

*Spare Time* (1939) has been identified as the film in which we first see the sign of Jennings's mature style developing.

In *Spare Time* there are also the beginnings of a personal style: a feeling for the industrial landscape of buildings and machinery, often portrayed in ambiguous beauty silhouetted against evening skies; a respect for the privacy of ordinary people coupled with the ability to give individuality even to those only briefly glimpsed. (Hillier 1972, p. 73)

The two elements of a personal style that Hillier identifies above could both be considered to originate from surrealist ideas. The notion of ambiguous beauty and the exploration of the everyday life of individuals are both important when considering surrealism in relation to the quotidian. Sheringham discusses how Breton maintains a sense that “the real mystery of the everyday world lies in its impenetrability” (Sheringham 2006, p. 78) and it is this same sense of mystery that can be experienced in Jennings's images of the towns' ambiguous beauty and the individuality of the briefly glimpsed figures who live there. Hillier erroneously described *Spare Time* as “Jennings's first film as director” (Hillier 1972, p. 71). Jennings is, however, given his first credit as director in 1934 and, in the five years leading up to *Spare Time*, we can see him attempt a range of styles and techniques in realising films on a number of educational and commercial topics. I will briefly describe each of these early films to explore how Jennings worked up to the mature style that starts to develop as Europe stands on the brink of World War Two.

Jennings's first directorial credit is for the GPO film *Post Haste* (1934), the film is produced by John Grierson and is an exploration of the history of the Post Office constructed mainly from rostrum work that utilises documents from the British Museum and the Postal Museum in Tottenham. The film's use of etchings and illustrations has something of the feel of Max Ernst's 1934 collage novel *Une semaine de bonté* (1934/1978) but lacks Ernst's subversion. Rather than reconfiguring the Victorian imagery, Jennings uses it in an illustrative, explicatory manner. The use of contemporary accounts through voice-over in *Post Haste* prefigures Jennings's book, *Pandæmonium: the coming of the machine as seen by contemporary observers* (1985), as it explores the coming of the Post Office as seen by contemporary observers. The film is mainly constructed from a series of still images (with the exception of the brief final sequence showing workers in a sorting office and transportation). In *Post Haste* (1934), Jennings adopts the surrealist technique of collage but his use of the process becomes fairly unambiguous when coupled with the expository voice-over. The film can be seen as an exploratory attempt by Jennings to illustrate his interest in the effect of the coming of the machine age on the human psyche and also an attempt to construct and audiovisual collage.

His next two films as director, *Locomotives* (1934) and *The Story of the Wheel* (1934) can also be considered as filmic equivalents to extracts from Jennings's *Pandæmonium* (1985). His use of museum models and subtle sound effects are developed further in his work on the animated film *The Birth of the Robot* (Lye, 1935) in the following year. From a synthetic critical approach, *Locomotives*

(Jennings, 1934) can be considered to include surreal moments: There is a shot of an unoccupied model steam train passing over a viaduct that resembles a painting by Giorgio de Chirico or Andre Kertesz's photograph *Muedon* (1928) and in the museological staging, the film can be considered a precursor of subsequent animations such as the Quay Brothers' *The Phantom Museum* (2003). As Cardinal has pointed out in a discussion of the early films of Jan Švankmajer (Cardinal, 2008), for the surrealist, the museum is an important metaphor for the wider world. Cardinal relates Švankmajer's early films to the work of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century painter, Giuseppe Archimboldo and to the imperial *Wunderkammer* that Archimboldo oversaw. Cardinal points out that in this precursor of the museum "if each object embodies an idea, each set of objects becomes a corpus of meanings, a summary of knowledge" (Cardinal 2008, p. 69). In *Locomotives* (1934) Jennings appears fascinated with the models and maquettes of the Science Museum, teasing out the objects' role as manifesting knowledge in concrete form. These details recur in *The Birth of the Robot* (Lye, 1935) on which Jennings worked as production designer. This film's more lyrical use of animated engineered mechanisms has a clear parallel with later works by Jan Švankmajer and, subsequently, the Quay Brothers. *Birth of the Robot* (Lye, 1935) is similar in feel to *This Unnameable Little Broom* (Quay & Quay, 1985) in its mise-en-scène and modeling. The film that follows *Locomotives*, *The Story of the Wheel* (Jennings, 1934) also utilises models and dioramas from museums to illustrate an educational voice-over. Touches such as the slow auto-closure of a mail carriage door and the mysterious sequences of empty roads intercut with shots of Roman

dioramas betray Jennings's engagement with surrealism but the rather plummy expository voice-over again ensures that the film has little ambiguity.

After a three-year gap during which Jennings was involved with the establishment of both the Surrealist Group in England and the Mass-Observation Group, *Farewell Topsails* (Jennings, 1937) is something of a development from his earlier GPO works. The film is shot in colour and was not produced for the GPO Film Unit. It was produced by a commercial organisation ostensibly in order to showcase a new colour film process (Dufaycolor). There are similarities to the three earlier films in that it deals with a historical subject. However, with the producer's focus on the technical aspect of the film, we can sense Jennings combining his newly acquired interest in Mass-Observation as social history with a lyrical cinematic sensibility. It concerns a disappearing aspect of British life, "the last survivors of a great race of seamen" and the last topsail schooners that are soon to disappear. It opens with a shot of an accordion player (an echo of which can be seen in *Listen to Britain* [Jennings & McAllister, 1942] where the Canadian troops sing "Home on the Range" to a guitar and accordion accompaniment). This shot is followed by a pan across a mysterious industrial/pastoral landscape. The voice-over (unattributed but most likely scripted by Jennings) makes links between the great white mounds of slag, glossy magazines and sailors out at sea. The film is an early example of Jennings's concern with the symbolic domain of the village as a world under threat. As the topsail schooners disappear, so does the life and function of the coastal village.

The traditions, skills and culture of the community is transforming as a result of the progress of the machine.

This linking of disparate concepts through labour, industry and the machine is a theme that weaves through much of Jennings's work where his on-going *Pandæmonium* project can be seen as the common thread. The fascination with physical labour, social history and the materiality of the mined landscape; the white clay that forms "great white chunks that look almost good enough to eat"; parallels Jennings's interpretation of Mass-Observation's Worktown project as a democratic form of surrealist practice. Worktown is the name given to the town of Bolton in the North of England by the Mass-Observation group. The name is given to the town not particularly to hide its identity but rather that Bolton/Worktown operates as a metaphor for the region of England where industrial work is situated. As Walker has noted (2007, p. 115), this use of metaphor is a tradition taken from English literature where Charles Dickens renames Preston as Coketown and Mrs Gaskell renames Manchester as Milton. The Worktown project ran from 1937 to 1938 and was a core element of the Mass-Observation group's first year of operation. Tom Harrisson instigated the project and Humphrey Spender is the most prolific photographer of Bolton during this period. Other artists and photographers also produced work in Bolton as part of the Worktown project including Humphrey Jennings and Julian Trevelyan, both of whom had exhibited at the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Bolton, in its positioning as symbolic of the industrial towns of Britain, becomes the surrealist village industrialised.

Jennings saw the Mass-Observation project as “an opportunity of democratizing the discoveries of surrealism and of representing popular subjectivity dialectically and in an unromanticised form” (Nowell-Smith 1986, p. 324). The rotting schooners on the beach and the child’s graffiti that appear in *Farewell Topsails* (1937) are examples of the surrealists’ fascination with the liminal areas of society and geography. In Paris, this manifested itself in photographic representations of the derelict spaces of the Zone: a strip of land that separated the city from its suburbs, “For the determined metrophile or metrophobe, the indeterminate territory that lay between the city and the country was tainted, impure. But in a surrealist reading, that sense of unease was a stimulation” (Walker 2002, p. 118). Jennings appears to be stimulated by this same feeling in *Farewell Topsails*: The land is neither industrial or pastoral, the men are not seen as heroic actors in a social project but more as cogs in the machine, victims of the inevitable force of technical progress over which they have no control. In this film there is both nostalgia, where the ship is alive in the eyes of the captain, but also a hard-edged futurist sensibility that anticipates the inevitable progress of mechanised industry. Jennings appears to be stimulated by the indeterminate nature of both the subject and the region but the film seems to tail off just as it is developing its argument: the voice-over explores the history of the ship depicted in detailed lyrical prose then, just as we feel that we are understanding the film’s narrative, the voice-over suddenly concludes with the lines “She slips along with a bone in her teeth, and, as the evening drains the colour from the scene, we leave her, homeward bound. Farewell topsails”. The film’s unfinished feel is most

likely the reason it is described as “more notable for charm than for manifest genius” (Jackson 2004, p. 206).

The following year Jennings directs *Penny Journey* (1938), a short film about the journey of a postcard from Manchester to Graffham in Sussex. The postcard is written by a young boy to his aunt and it forms a simple connecting thread between the urban and the rural as the boy writes “it must be nice to be in the country”. The voice-over with its arcane deference for Graffham Court, the local manor house, seems to be addressing the child who wrote the postcard rather than an adult audience but there is space in the film for a reading that transcends its superficial story. The documentary footage of postal workers and the mail process is fascinating from a social history perspective and some of the cinematography by H. Fowle and W.B. Pollard has a clear attention to detail that could indicate Jennings’s input. There is, for example, a scene in which the postman is sorting letters in a rural post office. On the dusty floor, there is a surrealist juxtaposition of objects: a cat slinks past two soda siphons, a shovel with the price chalked on its black blade, an oil can and a large ball of string. The postman empties his bag of letters and small parcels onto the floor and sorts them. Whereas in the city sorting office shown earlier in the film, the mail is sorted by machine and hand into anonymous pigeonholes, when it reaches the rural village Jennings presents us with images of the mail falling amongst a series of objects that begin to articulate what Cardinal calls (in his discussion of Svankmajer’s films) a “visual argument, a way of thinking, in which ideas are articulated through objects instead of words” (Cardinal 2008, p. 68). The two ornate soda siphons sit together



like two feminine figures next to the rough-hewn black shovel, the oil can ready to lubricate some strange relationship between the contrasting objects and the ball of string, a thread that binds and joins. A cat walks through this arrangement and the whole has the mood of a surrealist visual composition of the ambiguous everyday. This shot is just ten seconds in length and yet it swiftly and, almost invisibly, appears to conjure up some implausible relationship between everyday objects. At the end of the film, there is another brief sequence that seems to emphasise the village as a place of mystery and ambiguity that contrasts with the functional, mechanical city. In this final sequence, the voice-over describes how the postman takes “letters to the houses in the wood”. He is depicted walking up through the beech saplings, appearing from the dark woods to deliver a routine postcard. The note has travelled via a sequence of modes of transport from train to large van to small van to bicycle and finally on foot. When the card is delivered it has journeyed from the urban to the rural and from the modern to the eternal as the sentence “It must be nice to be in the country” is repeated. The symbolism of the modern (the postal service) operating in the same space as the eternal (the woodland) is a juxtaposition that appears in most of Jennings’s films. *Penny Journey* has a logical structure in the narrative of a postcard’s journey yet these occasional moments of mystery constructed from juxtapositions of the everyday foreground the visual nature of the film and allow the film to develop a visual argument which alludes to Jennings’s surreal village.

The slightly longer film *Speaking From America* (Jennings, 1938) deals with a similar topic in that it explains the technology behind a transatlantic telephone call.

The film utilises models, rostrum work, live action and reconstruction as well as stock footage. It has a more modernist, experimental feel in its subtle use of music and sound effects alongside its technical explication. Although the film deals with a relatively everyday subject, one can feel Jennings's interest in the technical aspect and the physical labour required to construct the new receiving system. The film illustrates Jennings's mastery of the documentary cinematic techniques espoused by Grierson and it is another archetypal example of the GPO Film Unit's output, stamped with the authorial mark of the unit rather than Jennings himself. The animated sequences in *Speaking From America* are comparable to *Birth of the Robot* (Lye, 1935) on which Jennings had worked as production designer. We can also sense in the film Jennings's fascination with the process of communication and the invisible, almost alchemical science that underlies it. The scientific development of telephony and radio communication has been considered as a metaphor for the various forms of surrealist expression; André Breton suggests this when he writes of Surrealism,

I hope it will be considered as having tried nothing better than to cast a *conduction wire* between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, the assurance of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, and so on.  
(Breton 1932/1990, p. 86)

In *Communicating Vessels*, Breton uses the conduction wire as a metaphor (in the same book he also discusses a biological metaphor in the "capillary tissue" (Breton, 1932/1990, p. 139) that connects internal and external realities, waking and sleeping). A comparable use of technological developments or scientific

terms as analogy also runs through Jennings's work. In *Communicating Vessels* (1932/1990), Breton describes the manner in which the human mind is "wonderfully prompt at grasping the most tenuous relation that can exist between two objects taken at random" (Breton 1932/1990, p. 109). He asserts that the act of comparing objects distant in space and time in an attempt to conjugate them "remains the highest task to which poetry can ever aspire" (Breton 1932/1990, p. 109). Jennings's combination of images distant in space and time; seemingly unrelated texts, images and sounds; is important to an understanding of the surrealism of his work.

Jennings's interest in the development of technology, as explored in *Pandæmonium* (1985), is rooted in the period from 1660 – 1886. Jennings collects quotes from scientists and inventors such as James Clerk Maxwell (1831 – 1879) and uses them to illustrate this same notion of the importance of creating a connection between exterior and interior realities. Maxwell, who formulated electromagnetic theory, expresses the importance of the dream as a means solving problems; he describes dreaming as "the best mode of resolving difficulties of a particular kind, which may be found out by thought, or especially by the laws of association" (Maxwell 1848, p. 141). Jennings's interest is in the imaginative reinterpretation of the world through invention and how technology allows for a paradoxical imagination of the world as both mythical and scientific. The text "images" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv) used in *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) illustrate how poets reacted to the progress of science from 1660 – 1886 and also how scientists used poetic techniques such as metaphor to describe the discoveries

of the time. The struggle to comprehend the implications of the new technologies of the machine age is transcribed in the texts selected by Jennings. The relationship between these texts that span a period of over 200 years is one that illustrates Breton's notion of conjugating objects that are distant in space and time. The texts (which are by turns poetic, scientific and documentary) are designed by Jennings to be read thematically, chronologically or randomly and as such, the individual images combine temporarily, affecting each other and exchanging meaning. In reading the book, science, imagination and myth combine and recombine such that the paradoxical imagining of the world by a spectrum of writers reconstructs their states of mind as one ever-changing image of pandæmonium.

Jennings's next film from 1938, *The Farm*, is a further Dufaycolor production that this time explores a day in the life of a farm. The film is constructed in the expository mode; the expository voice-over takes an educational tone. The film utilises light classical music, accompanied a voice-over with a light, comic tone. The pictorial compositions of the English landscape indicate a nostalgic attraction to the landscape in Jennings's work and it is this notion that Richardson (2006, p. 86) sees as sitting uneasily with surrealism. An alternative interpretation of Jennings's interest in the landscape has been posited by a number of writers on Jennings. They argue that his is an attempt to create a set of English symbols that would parallel the Parisian Cubists' guitar and wine bottle, to "Anglicise modernist iconography" (Mellor 1982, p. 64). Kathleen Raine points out that Jennings most often returned to "the pre-industrial symbols" (Raine 1951, p. 54)

of the plough, the windmill, the harvest field and the horse. The pastoral symbolism in Jennings's work could be read as nostalgic as it appears to acknowledge the landscapes of Constable and Turner, drawing the same link between romanticism and surrealism for which Jennings criticized Read. Jennings's use of pastoral symbolism is more an attempt to engage with archetypes that might operate as a "*conduction wire*" (Breton 1932/1990, p. 86) between the rural and the industrial, between Europe and the rest of the world. This can be seen in Jennings's poem *The Plough*.

The gallows, the vine, the gang, the beet, the subsoil, the hoe,  
The Norfolk wheel,  
Whether in Tull's tune-book, jefferson's design, on the Illinois prairie or  
pagoda ground,  
All, all I see reflected in the giant shadow plough  
(Jennings 1948a, p. 299)

The plough is a symbol that Jennings returns to over and over again in his painting, poetry and filmmaking. In the above poem, the plough operates as a metaphor for the conflict between mankind and nature through technology. The plough is a "giant shadow plough", it is more than a physical blade; it reflects the history of mankind's engagement with technology that includes labour enforced by the threat of the gallows. The opening image of the gallows acts as a symbolic shadow that runs through the poem, connecting with the closing image and drawing out (in Breton's conception of the ultimate task of poetry) the "concrete unity of the two terms" (Breton 1932/1990, p. 109). Kathleen Raine argues that Jennings's use of symbols such as the plough "belong neither to the past or the

future” (Raine 1951, p. 4). Although he selects symbols that have an ambiguity of time and location, they are all tied to the relationship between mankind, technology and the rural (farmed) landscape: the plough, the harnessed horse and the windmill are symbols that recur in his paintings, poems and films. Although Jennings also depicts the urban landscape, many of his urban works refer back to the same set of relationships and to the pastoral (for example the paintings that he made of allotments in Bolton).

Jennings’s pastoral vision is evidence of the second paradox discussed previously (that Surrealism is an international movement with distinct national identities) in that Jennings is attempting to explore the symbolic domain of English culture. His depictions of these English symbols should be read in relation to their paradoxical position as both eternal and under threat from a World War that would be directly dealt with in relation to the same topic two years later in *Spring Offensive* (1940). *The Farm* (1938) is constructed as an expository documentary with its clearly illustrative voice-over taking an anthropological approach to exploring rural life in England. The one hint of threat to this way of life is contained in the lines of commentary:

A peaceful scene where thoughts of war and rumours of war have no place.  
Whatever may happen to us, nature has decreed that seedtime and harvest  
continue their unending round. (Jennings, 1938)

The carefully composed imagery by cinematographer J.D. Davidson parallels shots in Jennings’s later films such as *Listen to Britain* (1942) that opens with a

comparable pastoral sequence of waving cornfields. In *The Farm* (Jennings, 1938), Jennings is exploring the symbolic domain that would be a key feature of his subsequent work. An alternative version entitled *English Harvest* (Jennings, 1938) is more lyrical in its use of Beethoven's 6th (Pastoral) Symphony on the soundtrack and, with its more limited and descriptive voice-over; it is closer to Jennings's wartime work. Jennings's final film of this period is *Making Fashion* (1938), an expository documentary that is effectively an advertisement for the high society fashion designer, Norman Hartnell. We can see Jennings's interest in the classics and theatricality enacted in the film's attempt to connect high fashion with the clothes of ancient Greece via artifacts from the British Museum. We can see the workers in the London textile factories applying sequins but there is no inference of a political or social critique of this labour. As with his first films, *Post Haste* (1934), *Locomotives* (1934) and *The Story of the Wheel* (1934), Jennings's interest in the connections across history between antiquity, the Victorian age and the present day is clearly evident. Jennings's work leading up to *Spare Time* (1939), "his first significant film" (Richardson 2006, p. 86), is varied and intimates the future poetic evolution of his films. Although these first films are not as lyrical as his later works, we can see that the form and content of *Spare Time* has a developmental relationship to Jennings's exploratory directorial work in the preceding five years.

*Spare Time* (1939): Surrealism and the Everyday

*Spare Time* (1939) is a much more confident work that appears to articulate a number of the interests and themes that Jennings has developed through his work with the Surrealist Group in England and subsequently through his Mass-Observation work. Although *Spare Time* has been described as his “Mass Observation film” (Roberts 2007, p. 96), it is equally a film that articulates Jennings’s conception of surrealism as having “the infinite freedom of appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone: in broad daylight to those whom we most despise in places we have most loathed: not even to us at all: probably least to petty seekers after mystery and poetry on deserted seashores and in misty junk shops.” (Jennings 1936, p. 220). Jennings’s engagement with surrealism and the Mass-Observation project through *Spare Time* is a radical move in that he draws a clear distinction between the romantic notion of seeking mystery on “deserted seashores and in misty junk shops” (ibid), democratizing surrealism in its “infinite freedom” (ibid). This move can be seen as a direct response to Herbert Read and the other members of the Surrealist group in England and their attempt to ally surrealism with romanticism (Read 1936a). In arguing that surrealism can appear anywhere, Jennings takes his camera to three areas of Britain far from the London Gallery and Cork Street to record everyday life in broad daylight.

The film has a commentary by Laurie Lee who had recently returned from fighting with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War<sup>2</sup>. The Surrealist group in England had been vocal in their support of the International Brigade,

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<sup>2</sup> *A Moment of War* (Lee L. , 1991) is a semi-autobiographical account of Lee’s time as a member of the International Brigade.



publishing their statement *Declaration on Spain* in 1936 (quoted in Remy 1999, p. 105). Lee's experiences must have coloured his commentary, which, although appearing to be a conventional voice-of-god expository voice-over, can be read as a subtly subversive parody of the Griersonian documentary ideal. Jackson has identified that, although the commentary "adds little in the way of reflection to the film" (Jackson 2004, p. 213), there are subtleties in the script that suggests, for example, that "social matters might, perhaps, be ordered very differently" (Jackson 2004, p. 213). There is an element of this social critique in the closing lines of the script which Lee opens with the telling phrase "As things are, spare time is a time when we have a chance to do what we like" accompanied by an image of miners being shut into a cage lift and sent underground, their heads disappearing into the blackness as he says "a chance to be most ourselves".

*Spare Time* is divided into three sections that look at three parts of the UK and the industries that define them but, instead of considering the noble toil of the workers, Jennings considers the activities that they engage in when they are not working. The commentary defines this in the following line: "between work and sleep comes the time we call our own". This space between labour and sleep could equally be called free time, and it is this space, a time where the adult imagination is allowed a modicum of freedom, that Breton hints at in the opening pages of the first Manifesto of Surrealism (1924). Work and sleep represent the elements of everyday existence in which man belongs "body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention" (Breton 1924, p. 4). It is only in the small window of free (or spare) time that Jennings's

film concerns itself with, that man is able to exercise his imagination outside the “laws of an arbitrary utility” (Breton 1924, p. 4) and may attempt to transcend his “lusterless fate” (ibid). Whereas the majority of films produced by the GPO Film Unit deal with utilitarian subject matter such as international trade or communication technologies, Jennings’s film is about how ordinary working class people in the North of England use their free time. As such it neither deals with a practical subject nor does it serve a utilitarian end.

The opening shot is of the chimneys of an industrial town, followed by a statue of the radical liberal economist and politician, Cobden<sup>3</sup>. As the film’s voice-over outlines its supposed structure as a simple exploration of three British industries: steel, cotton and coal, Jennings subtly announces the republican and internationalist credentials of the Manchester region through this shot of Cobden. This is followed, in succession, by shots of a gasometer, a hand-drawn milk cart and a temperance bar where a child interacts with a dog as the camera pans right to left, resting on the same distant industrial landscape framed between the bar and 19<sup>th</sup> century residential property set back from the road. With a rickety wooden fence and bare shrubby tree in the foreground, the scene resembles the “*Terrain vague*: waste ground, unused land” (Walker 2002, p. 115) that Walker identifies in surrealist photography and prefigures the location that is used later in the film for the Kazoo band sequence. We are left with the question as to what we should do with our spare time and the following brief observational sequence has

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<sup>3</sup> Although Richard Cobden (1804 -1865) was involved with the Anti-Corn-Law league which places him in opposition to the more radical Chartists, he is still sympathetic to their democratic aspirations (Howe & Morgan 2006) and is an important figure in urging political reform and universal suffrage.

no contextualizing voice-over, we are left to imagine what the people depicted may be about to do. The film's score rises in tempo and volume as we are shown a montage of men and women heading to work. There is an emphasis on the visual in this sequence where the observation of everyday life, its small gestures and poses give the people individuality. They are not represented solely as part of a mass of workers with a specific function but rather as individuals with spirit and imagination. Two women skip towards each other across a wide, empty, smoggy terraced street and talk briefly as a girl stands in-between, a skipping rope dangling from her hands. This is followed by a brief shot of a man walking along the street with his daughter, the cumulative effect of this opening sequence being a representation of the everyday life of a working class community.

Following this introductory sequence, we see the brass band of the Sheffield steel workers. They gather together playing darts in a scene that would be repeated by Jennings in his later film *Fires Were Started* (1943). The band begin their performance on stage and this is intercut with ambiguously beautiful shots of the city's streets and industry. Everyday domestic life is then revealed through a sequence in which a family eats a large pie in a clean, ordered and tidy house. The opening shot of this sequence shows the son reading a Western adventure comic with a strange image of the sole of a foot on the back page. Conley has argued in a discussion of *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes*, Buñuel, 1933) that, "The violence of 'facts' in documentaries overwhelms spectators by blinding the critical power of the eye to the esthetics that constitute the very basis of its veracity" (Conley 1996, p. 176). In this sequence we are not overwhelmed by facts, rather we are

drawn into an observation of the everyday where the aesthetics of Jennings's visual compositions and juxtapositions are brought to the fore, allowing the critical eye of the spectator to construct their own meaning from the actuality. This juxtaposition of images offers an illustration of the way that Jennings's work has developed from earlier sequences such as the post office sequence from *Penny Journey* (1938) discussed above.

As the brass band continues to play we are shown a man taking his greyhounds out for exercise in another of the film's *terrain vagues*: grassland surrounded by industrial architecture. This is followed by a shot a pigeon fancier and then an extended sequence of a bicycle outing. The bicycles' upturned wheels are fixed, adjusted and then ridden out into the rural hinterland where the cyclists stop for a beer and a sandwich. As the music of the brass band fades out, the film returns to the city where we see a football match and football pools. At this point, with no voice-over or music, the use of natural sound becomes an element of Mass-Observation, a technique that Jennings subsequently develops in *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942). The collage soundtrack of *Spare Time* is a good example of how Jennings combines the visual image with the audio and text image, each being given equal importance in the overall sequence. The brass band that has linked together disparate pursuits gives way to silence accompanying an image of a poster advertising the football pools. This is followed by a sequence of men queuing to place their bets as the soundtrack segues into a recording of the crowd cheering and we see a brief sequence at the football ground. The first section of the film is completed by a fade to black.

The second section of the film opens with the voice-over announcing: "Cotton. The mills open at eight and close at five, Saturday afternoons and Sundays off." This section should be seen in relation to Jennings's first impressions of the Manchester region, which he expresses in a letter written at the time: "It has a grim sort of fantasy. And a certain dignity of its own... Cotton seems to produce a desolation greater – more extended - than any other industry" (Jennings 1939, p. 5). What follows next appears entirely unrelated to the dialogue and stands out from the earlier sequences to the extent that Hillier describes it as "the almost surreal appearance of the Kazoo band" (Hillier 1972, p. 73). In the establishing shot of the Kazoo band, Jennings shoots from a high angle; the band are placed in orderly ranks in the centre of a large flat area of waste ground, surrounded by a high wall with bare trees along the border and, beyond this, the rear of rows of terraced housing. The bandleader's whistle blows and the band begin to march steadily forward in time with one central figure appearing to dance in a more exuberant manner. Jennings holds this establishing long shot slightly longer than might be expected before cutting to an eye-level long shot of the bandleader. It is now shown more clearly that the band members are wearing flowing satin trousers and playing kazoo trumpets. Their uniforms are out of place, slightly disconcerting, they appear as if modernist morris men. The members of the band appear to be focused on the performance, their facial expressions are serious. Jennings demonstrates an eye for the unusual here, for a reality that is not revealed in the stereotypes of the British worker as produced by the GPO.

The interest in American popular culture in this sequence is a representation of popular interests but not necessarily a critique of these interests. As the band continues to play we are shown shots of a mother at home with her baby, a boy chalking graffiti on the pavement (a subject that the Jennings and others had photographed in Bolton during the Worktown Mass-Observation project and a motif that recurs in other of Jennings's films such as *Fires Were Started* [1943]), a man with a model boat and a couple tending their allotment. Jennings then cuts back to the Kazoo band, some of who are assembling a stretcher to carry aloft a young girl dressed as Britannia. The band strikes up a melancholy rendition of Rule Britannia. It is, perhaps, the way in which this could be read as an attack on patriotic British nationalism that made Grierson and others at the GPO feel uncomfortable. Kevin Jackson (2004, pp. 211 - 216) argues persuasively that any discomfort felt about the representations of the working class in *Spare Time* (either at the time or subsequently) are more to do with the viewer's preconceptions than Jennings's. The sequence offers the viewer neither the comfort of tradition nor the security of urban working class archetypes, the meaning is uncertain and it is this uncanniness that has been read by some as alienating (Winston 1995, p. 53).

Vaughn (1983 p. 42) notes that the kazoo band sequence was suggested in the film's treatment prior to Jennings's involvement with the project in that the plans for what would later become *Spare Time* were outlined in a memorandum from the production office of the GPO film unit. The draft memorandum suggests the kazoo band as a subject for inclusion in the proposed film about British workers

with a note saying that “This recreation is rather pathetic” (quoted in Vaughn 1983, p. 43). It is not beyond the realms of possibility that Grierson or someone close to him wrote this note and that Jennings’s inclusion of this performance can be seen as a challenge to the ideology of Grierson and the Unit. In terms of this thesis, it is more relevant to explore Jennings’s treatment of the event in relation to surrealist ideas rather than to any supposed patronizing attitude on the part of Jennings. The second treatment for the project (attributed to Jennings) declares that...

The general tone of the film will be bright. Without being in any sense unfaithful to the truth, it will attempt to show the natural gaiety of working people, and the varied expression which it finds...

(quoted in Vaughn 1983, p. 44)

An alternative reading of the rendition of Rule Britannia in this sequence is that it appears to be mocking the notion of the British Empire rather than the people playing the music. The juxtaposition in the following sequence of children watching a caged tiger and lion in Manchester zoo and adults watching a wrestling match adds to the surrealism of this most notorious of sequences from the film. The sequence has been described as containing “easily the movement’s most alienated and alienating images of the working class in the pre-war period” (Winston 1995, p. 53) and reportedly it “caused great anger in documentary film circles” (Walker 2007, p. 110). As mentioned previously, this says more about Winston and the politics of documentary in the 1930s than it does about Jennings.

A whistle blows, Rule Britannia ends and we see the rehearsals for an amateur theatrical production. The whole kazoo band sequence is shot in a detached style as a mimetic Mass-Observation document and the sequence fits Bate's notion of the "prophotographic" (Bate 2004, pp. 25 - 28) in that the event is already surreal prior to being filmed. In Bate's argument it has an enigmatic effect: "exactly what is being communicated, 'signified', is not clear" (Bate 2004, p. 29). Jennings's representation of the kazoo band may appear enigmatic but it is likely to have developed out of his interest in rural culture, for example the traditions of morris dancing and rural festivals. The village is the site of these traditions and the inclusion of this modern equivalent to rural traditions illustrates Jennings's interest in the symbolism of the village. This notion of the town as village is also present in the shots of the town in the opening sequence, where the women gathering on the street to talk and the isolated corner shop represent the nature of the town as a series of smaller communities. The manner in which these elements are presented suggest that Jennings visualises the town as a village. Workers are seen heading back from their place of work to their communities where they can spend what little spare time they are allowed. Jennings's interest in the migration of the rural worker to the town is one of the subjects of *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) and is illustrated by a number of the text "images" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv) in his book. The opening sequences of *Spare Time* illustrate his awareness that it is only a generation or two that separate these people from the original migrants from the village to the cities.



The next sequence in *Spare Time* is of a ballroom and is similar to the dance sequence in *Listen to Britain*. The band plays a series of introductory chords that are quite modernist and minimal as the couples drift onto the floor before the melody develops. Again Jennings includes an element of American popular culture in the swing styling of the band as the dancers float before the camera. In a cinematic style that parallels the techniques of the Mass-Observation movement, Jennings uses a high camera angle to record the small gestures of the dancers. A range of body types and ages passes before Jennings's camera: men dance with women, women dance with women, some hold each other closely, others hold at a distance, a woman stops to re-fasten the strap of her sandal. These details are presented as observational reportage unaccompanied by a contextualizing voice-over and sit somewhere between the poetic and expository documentary modes.

The final section of the film explores the leisure activities of the Welsh mining community. The voice-over curtly, and almost exasperatingly, offers two terse words: "Finally coal", as an establishing shot pans across a mining village and shows the proximity of the coal works as a siren sounds. It is now evening and Jennings cuts straight to a further site of popular culture associated with surrealism: the funfair. A montage sequence shows a waltzer with a mirror ball, a shooting gallery and coconut shy, all against a backdrop of the mine's winding gear. This is followed by an effectively realised sequence that has elements of artifice and yet exudes naturalism, mainly due to the performances of the non-professional actors. A similar scene would subsequently be constructed by Jennings in the "One Man Went to Mow" sequence of *Fires Were Started* (1943).

In this earlier sequence from *Spare Time*, a woman sits down at a piano in a public hall and removes her scarf as she starts to pick out a few notes. As she starts to play the melody, a group of men walk into the shot and gather around the piano. As they remove their hats and coats they start to sing, the pianist begins to play a different melody and she stands as the fifth man helps her to remove her coat as she continues to play. Then, as the music starts in earnest, Jennings cuts away from the hall to a public house where pints are being pulled and men are sitting around drinking.

Jennings shows working men drinking beer, talking and playing cribbage in a manner for which films of the British new wave such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960) would later be lauded. Jennings then cuts to a marionette show of a traditional Welsh harpist and back to the public hall where the same music is played, but now a choir is seated in the hall, they commence to sing. As the song develops Jennings cuts away to the village at night, a general store and sweet shop. These images that have a haunting uncanniness, operate in a similar way to Atget's photographs of Paris, that Walker describes as seeming to "form a bridge between nineteenth century topographical photography and twentieth-century modernism" (Walker 2002, p. 88). A woman talks to the shopkeeper and, framed between their eyeline, sits a box with the legend "a meal for sixpence". Sweets are eaten on the streets in low-key lighting, a camera tracks along the lit shop fronts at night in an understated expressionist documentary sequence that appears to prefigure the camerawork of film noir. Boys play basketball in a YMCA hall before Jennings cuts back to a final domestic interior

where a woman is carving bread as if it were a joint of beef and a man reads a newspaper with the headline “Her Scent Was Bat’s Delight” before she tenderly pours him a cup of strong tea in low-key lighting. Men dress and leave their houses, expressionist shadows cast along corrugated iron fences before the siren sounds and the pithead re-appears. The men take their torches and disappear again into the dark just as the sun is rising above ground. The voice-over resurfaces as the men are seen enclosed in the pit’s lift – “as things are, spare time is a time when we can do what we like, a chance to be most ourselves” - the words are almost spat out as if Laurie Lee and Jennings are subverting the film by this final sequence of men trapped in the dark by their labour – the cheerful trumpet call at the end appears a parody of the images we have seen. The phrase “as things are” hangs in the air, inviting change.

It is possible to read *Spare Time* as an equivalent to *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes*, Buñuel, 1933), in the sense that in both films “we are grasped by the evidential as enigmatic signifier” (Cowie 2011, p. 142). Jennings’s film is peppered with sequences that present actuality (the evidential) as neutral, with the voice-over adding little but descriptive information such as “the mills open at 8.00 and close at 5.00, Saturday afternoons and Sundays off”. We engage with this evidential material, such as the footage of the kazoo band, and attempt to translate the juxtapositions of images: the facial expressions of the people portrayed, the symbolism of flags, greenhouses, lions, wrestling and *Rule Britannia* played by kazoo. We attempt to interpret this material in such a way that creates meaning

but there will always be an uncertainty, an ambiguity in the material and it is this puzzle that forms the enigmatic signifier from the evidential.

The surreal... appears whenever we encounter the absence and thus failure of meaning that, much as nature abhors a vacuum, we seek to fill, yet for all the answers we may offer, we cannot be certain which, or that even any, are true. (Cowie 2011, p. 141)

Both Jennings's and Buñuel's films (*Spare Time* and *Las Hurdes*) are superficially ethnographic representations of working class regions and both employ relatively inexpressive voice-overs that could be considered parodies of objective documentary form. In both films the lives of working class people are presented to us as unexplained, in *Spare Time* the contrast between the implied heavy labour and the pictured spare time activities raises questions about modern life and the working conditions of the miners and mill workers that the neutral voice-over refuses to answer. Although the level of both deprivation (in the representations) and parody (in the style) is at variance, there are parallels between the effects of the two films. *Spare Time* can be seen not only as indicative of the development of a film style but also an ideological approach to film. Walker identifies that Jennings's work in Bradford for Mass-Observation was important as he, "like most men of his class and education, had no first-hand experience of its actuality" (Walker 2007, p. 112). If we couple Jennings's experiences in Bolton with Breton's argument for engagement with concrete political issues and the growing threat of war in Europe, we can see that *Spare Time* is a pivotal film, not only in relation to Jennings's stylistic developments but

also to his use of surrealism and film as a response to the wider “attacks on thought” (Breton 1936a, p. 90), specifically the threat of a fascist coup in France, that Breton warned against in his 1936 tract. *Spare Time* opens the way for Jennings’s wartime films that I argue respond to the intellectual atmosphere of the war by addressing this threat directly whilst remaining true to the spirit of surrealism.

The ambiguity of *Spare Time* is perhaps best illustrated by the stark comparison with the films being made under the auspices of the propaganda arm of the Nazi party in Germany during the 1930s. The most celebrated German documentary film of this era is *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, Riefenstahl, 1934), a film that depicts the preparation and execution of the 1934 Nazi congress. In the opening twenty minutes of the film Riefenstahl depicts everyday scenes of Nuremberg; folk parades, sausages being cooked in a field kitchen, informal wrestling matches; all with no contextualizing voice-over or captions. Hinton describes the folk parade sequence in *Triumph of the Will* in the following terms “lasting five minutes, this sequence contains no significant events” (Hinton 2000, p. 32). Whereas a folk parade is an insignificant cypher in Riefenstahl’s film, in Jennings’s work the significance of folk tradition is interrogated for cultural and social significance whilst remaining ideologically ambiguous. Unlike *Spare Time*, the meaning of *Triumph of the Will* progresses to become something entirely unambiguous as it illustrates the Nazi leaders and the message of their party. Rother argues that “If the Party Rally had been staged in order to convey an ideological message to a mass audience, the film reconstructed that ideological

message for an even wider public” (Rother 2003, p. 62). Jennings’s group of films from *Post Haste* (1934) to *Spare Time* (1939) develop as surrealist texts in the way that they take actuality into the domain of the symbolic whilst remaining ambiguous, they foreground the visual and operate in the poetic documentary mode. Taking a line somewhere between continuity and montage editing, they transmit reality as a series of subjective impressions and fragments that become “knots in the great net of tangled space and time” (Jennings 1985, p. xxxv).

As *Spare Time* (1939) concentrates on the quotidian in both the nominal subject matter and its presentation, it is apposite to consider Humphrey Jennings and surrealist film in relation to notions of the everyday. When discussing surrealism and the everyday, we are also addressing the concept of the uncanny. This relationship between the everyday and the uncanny is what Cavell describes as “the uncanniness of the ordinary” (Cavell 1994, p. 154). Cavell considers the way in which this uncanniness is epitomised by scepticism, understood as the desire to repudiate the evidential. In terms of documentary filmmaking, we can consider this to be understood as a presentation of actuality that is read (either through its presentation in the environment of the cinema or through the uses of film language) as something beyond the evidential: something super-real. Cavell calls this “the surrealism of the habitual” (Cavell 1994, p. 154). We can apply Cavell’s ideas to films that represent everyday life such as *Spare Time*. In this film we can sense Jennings’s perception of the human as “inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic” (Cavell 1994, p. 154). Whereas Cavell is mainly considering these ideas in relation to literature, Klevan develops Cavell’s writings

in relation to film. He initially considers how the ordinary is made more vivid by theatricalisation in comic melodrama (Klevan 2000, p. 27). He expands on this in a discussion of the cinema of directors such as Bresson, in whose films an ordinary object such as a door can be converted to “something magical and divine” (Klevan 2000, p. 28) through the film’s choreography; its camera movement, direction and editing. Klevan considers the quest for the ordinary in relation to fiction films and the attempts made by film directors to bring a certain authenticity to representations of the real. He explores how “The cinema’s possibilities for discovering significance in the everyday lie in the medium’s epistemological basis in reality, but not necessarily in the pursuit of the real” (Klevan 2000, p. 49). Jennings’s approach to the significance of the everyday lie in his presentation of documentary reality: In *Spare Time* and later films such as *Listen to Britain*, Jennings’s concern is not so much with pursuing the real but rather in exploring the symbolic significance of the real. One has to be wary in discussions of the everyday to avoid the notion that the everyday can be raised to the level of a series of epiphanies. It is rather the paradoxical nature of the everyday as both ever present but unnoticed that is of interest to the surrealist. Sheringham (2006) addresses this paradox in his discussion of critical positions that oscillate between negative and positive evaluations of the everyday, concluding that the everyday can be considered as “a level of human reality whose very ambiguity and indeterminacy are seen as clues to its importance” (Sheringham 2006, p. 23). He discusses the everyday as a “liminal region of experience that we can be aware of only at the fringes of consciousness”

(Sheringham 2006), and this ambiguous liminality can be seen as crucial to a surrealist interpretation of the everyday.

Surrealist investigations into the everyday are concerned with identifying what the Czech surrealist, Petr Kral describes as “flaw(s) in the tapestry of the world” (Kral 2012, p. 15). Surrealist investigations into the quotidian tend to explore how everyday places can appear to disguise a certain mystery and how “drawing up an inventory of these exceptional places... might help us open up a breach so that they can make their voices heard.” (Kral 2012, p. 16). The precursors of surrealism had explored the everyday in their attempts to represent modern life: Apollinaire constructed prose and poetry from observations of everyday urban life and the Dadaists use of the detritus of everyday life to create collages or found objects was coupled with their desire to intervene in everyday life through provocative acts and performances. Sheringham argues that Breton’s first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) is not rooted in a desire to discard everyday life in exchange for dreams or fantasy, but rather that “surrealist aspiration is directed to what is latent but elusive within the everyday co-ordinates of existence rather than what lies outside them.” (Sheringham 2006, p. 68). The surrealist exploration of the everyday does not involve the transcendence of reality but rather the development of an understanding of the communication between the two. Breton summarises this notion towards the end of his 1928 essay *Surrealism and Painting*.



Everything I love, everything I think and feel, predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it. And reciprocally, too, because the container would also be its contents. What I envisage is almost a communicating vessel between the container and the contained. (Breton 1928/1972b, p. 46)

Jennings's tool for this surrealist research is the film camera and the documentary film. In his recordings of quotidian events and places, we can sense that he is attempting to present the elusiveness of the everyday and that these paradoxical representations of the everyday as both commonplace and exceptional are heightened in the films that follow *Spare Time*. With *Listen to Britain*, the film that illustrates the height of his achievement in terms of poetic representations of the everyday, he raises his quotidian subject matter to the level of the mythological. Whereas *Spare Time* concentrates on the everyday in its subject matter and its presentation, with *Listen to Britain*, these representations become additionally imbued with the historical events from which they emerge. *Listen to Britain* (and to some extent the films that immediately precede it) operates as a communicating vessel, reflecting the surrealism of the everyday back into the everyday through the cinema. The film is about the British nation's fight against fascism but fighting or militarism are not the focus of the film, instead Jennings draws up an inventory of the unexceptional events of wartime Britain that, to paraphrase Kral, opens up a breach in the tapestry of the world that allows the voices of Britain to be heard (Kral 2012, p. 16).

Soon after the onset of the Second World War, the GPO Film Unit becomes the Crown Film Unit. Controlled by the wartime Ministry of Information it effectively turns into the propaganda arm of the British war effort. The next two films that I intend to focus on in detail - *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) and *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) - were made under the auspices of the Ministry of Information produced and realised in the critical atmosphere of wartime realities. Breton identifies the difficulties of working creatively in times of war when he writes, in a 1944 review of Enrico Donati's paintings,

The almost total bankruptcy of the critical spirit which is a mental characteristic of wartime periods has again registered profound effects on the development of the arts and the interplay of ideas involved in that development. For several years now, we have been obliged, willy-nilly, to live in an unrelenting atmosphere of edification, each of us supposed to bear witness to the great good that is being accomplished by the paradoxical means of carnage and destruction. (Breton, 1944/1972b, p. 195)

In this light, it is therefore a substantial achievement that Jennings's films from this period are ones that have been nominated as his masterpieces in subsequent years. *Listen to Britain* has become the most well-known of his works, variously described as "Jennings' greatest film" (Roberts 2007, p. 96), "the climax, both stylistically and thematically" (Hillier 1972, p. 86) and his "unrivalled masterpiece" (Jackson 2004, p. 246). Before discussing this more lauded wartime work in detail, I will briefly explore the films made in the period between the production of *Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*.

Films from *S.S. Ionian* (1939) to *Words for Battle* (1941)

Following the exploration of working class life in *Spare Time*, Jennings's next film entails a journey around the Mediterranean on board the Merchant Navy ship, S.S. *Ionian*. The film, which depicts a British ship's journey from Gibraltar to Alexandria and Haifa, functions as a reassuring portrayal of the Royal Navy's mastery of the seas and the tactical positioning of a range of warships throughout the Mediterranean. *S.S. Ionian* (1939) opens with a series of brief shots that have become tropes of the Jennings canon: The landscape illustrated by the wind rustling leaves of trees in the spring sunshine and a wide view across the expanse of a tree dotted landscape towards the sea. This is followed by some shots that indicate Jennings's interest in the connections between ancient history and the present day. Ancient civilization is illustrated by a shot of the broken columns in a deserted Greek ruin reminiscent of the paintings of De Chirico. We then see illustrations of Ulysses' Odyssey taken from Ancient Greek ceramics before the narrator describes an inventory of items that the ship is delivering along with accompanying images of goods being unloaded and lifted ashore. The prosaic inventory masks a series of surrealist associations: "steel, explosives, cement, beer, telegraph poles, corrugated iron and aeroplane spares". It has been noted that the notion of the inventory is "central to Surrealism's contribution to later explorations of the *quotidien*" (Sheringham 2006, p. 82) and Jennings would be well aware of the surrealist uses of the inventory in texts such as Aragon's surrealist novel, *Paris Peasant* (1926/1994). The opening chapter of Aragon's book is a detailed description of the *Passage de l'Opéra*, including inventories

such as the names of the seven hairdressers at the boutique *Norma* (Aragon 1994, p. 43).

In the next sequence Jennings develops this tactic visually in compiling a sequence of abstract compositions framed from elements of the ship's mechanism and rigging, cut against the rock of Gibraltar moving past. The parts of the ship that form this visual inventory include the Captain's bald head, captured peering through his sextant in an ambiguous composition, a thermometer being wiped in close-up and Constructivist framings of thrusting pistons and sailors stoking boilers. Jennings's film has details and individual shots that have a slightly disconcerting arbitrary nature, as well as framings of the everyday that parallel the uses of the quotidian in *Spare Time*. In *S.S. Ionian* we see washing hanging on a line amongst the ship's rigging and steaming funnels, locals wandering on the Maltese shore, a sailor whistling to a canary in a cage, dockers using hand signals to guide the cargo ashore and the view through a porthole; all are shown as subjective fragments of reality. However, unlike *Spare Time*, the use of expository narration in *S.S. Ionian* dominates the film, clearly explaining the everyday activities that we see, allowing little room for the elements of illogical ambiguity that surface in *Spare Time* where the visuals are allowed to dominate.

*S.S. Ionian* is followed by another less well-known film *The First Days* (1939). The film is produced by Alberto Cavalcanti and co-directed by Jennings, Harry Watt and Pat Jackson and, as such, Jennings's input can only be inferred by reference to his interests and comparison to his other works. The script is written

by Robert Sinclair and the film attempts a depiction of the London home front at the outset of the Second World War. The film opens with shots of children playing on the captured German guns from the First World War that sit outside the Imperial War Museum. This is followed by a tracking shot of more arms from the First World War inside the museum as we hear a band playing *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. The film is a portrait of London, yet the scenes depicted by Jennings owe more to the tropes of rural life than they do to the city streets that are the “true ground of the surrealist adventure” (Sheringham 2006, p. 72). The next shot is of a deserted London street, the rhythms of everyday life are not depicted on the boulevard or in the arcade but rather through Sunday pastimes that echo some of the details of *Spare Time* (1939). First we see churchgoing, then suburban families setting off on picnicking and cycle trips. As a radio broadcast announcing the outbreak of war is carried on the soundtrack, we see clouds, empty streets and everyday activities such as washing-up, and tea drinking as people listen to the grim news report. Although much of the imagery is illustrative, the juxtaposition of everyday existence with the threat of war announced via a radio broadcast makes these familiar activities appear strange, uncertain and symbolic. There is a lack of emotion when the war is announced and the streets are shown as remaining empty. There is no panic, rather London is depicted as a contemplative city. Following the contemplation of the grim news, we see the billowing clouds above London as the voices of British radio broadcasts announce to the world “this is London calling”. There is a brief scene depicting the “friendliness” of wartime London as a small group of people gathers calmly in an air raid shelter, chatting informally. This is followed by scenes that foreshadow what would later

be described as the “surrealism of the blitz” (Walker 2007, pp. 138 - 159): These include shots of sand being excavated from Hyde Park to create sandbags that become strange symbolic abstractions described by the voice-over as “rising like a tide in our streets”. The preparations for war are described as “the external signs of a great upheaval in London’s inner life” and the communication between inner and outer realities is a theme that runs through the film. Although the film may be, in Hammond’s terms “accidentally” surrealist (Hammond 1978, p. 18), Jennings’s involvement with surrealism and Mass-Observation can be inferred in the symbolic significance of these observations of the everyday. These observations include a folk art sandbag rock of Gibraltar, described by the voice-over as “a living Cockney monument built by Cockney hands”. Alongside the uncanny structures created by formations of sandbags, there are images of the mysterious levitating barrage balloons suspended above the city like objects from a Magritte painting and, in another series of visually striking shots, trainee soldiers leaning out of windows as the voice-over says “they are still our children”.

The narrator describes London as “a new world where everything seems strange”. The new world of wartime Britain does appear strange as children label themselves like packages in readiness to be sent away on trains to unknown places. There are shots of a man riding an oversized dray horse to work and a mannequin in a shop window sporting a gas mask that Logan suggests “may have been taken by Jennings” (Logan 2011, p. 126). The location moves to Trafalgar Square where there is a brief sequence depicting parting lovers that has indications that it may have been filmed by Jennings. The voiceover announces, “it was a time for saying

goodbye” as a young man buys a young woman a bunch of roses. The young woman looks somewhat like Sheila Legge, the model and artist who had appeared at the opening of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936 (her face covered with roses, she was photographed in Trafalgar Square as the Phantom of Surrealism). The significance of the couple buying roses is emphasized by the voice-over as it repeats the word “goodbye” three times, a gap of over ten seconds between each repetition. We then see the young woman again, this time she walks past the flower vendor, refusing to buy roses. Although the sequence is clearly referring to the men who have gone away to fight, leaving the women behind, it is possible to see the location, the roses and the model as being a reference by Jennings to the 1936 exhibition and to the need to say goodbye to the spirit of 1936 as he prepares for the time to come. The subsequent sequence is one that would be duplicated in *Listen to Britain*. We see the vacant spaces of the National Gallery: empty frames and bare walls, as if the objects have left of their own volition. The titles on the empty frames read: *Age of Innocence*, *Heads of Angels* and *The Parson’s Daughter* and there is an uncanniness in these empty spaces. The familiar becomes defamiliarised by the absence of paintings, what was useful has become empty and the gallery has the feeling of an empty house with the haunting nature of a painting by de Chirico. At the British Museum, the act of winching a Roman sculpture from its pedestal is described by the voice-over as “a hanging”; this removal of statuary from its pedestal has a further disconcerting effect that parallels the empty streets and galleries seen earlier in the film.

The filmmakers use montage techniques to link ideas together across the film: a reverse shot allows a cat to look up at a barrage balloon then, a few minutes later, another reverse angle is used to suggest that the Queen of England is also looking up at an equivalent hovering silver balloon. With its inclusion of popular music and aspects of the quotidian, structured through montage, the film as a whole appears to be a dry run for *Listen to Britain*. The moments of uncanniness such as the sandbags, empty galleries and barrage balloons are framed by a surrealist's eye. Although these surreal moments may seem accidental to the viewer, it can be inferred that there was an intention on the part of Jennings and Cavalcanti to juxtapose the quotidian with the threat of war in order to create poetry through paradox. The film is a good example of the third paradox outlined previously, i.e. it is a group project, directed by three filmmakers and produced by another. Jennings has no overall control of this collective effort yet we can still sense his individual concerns threading through the film.

Jennings's first film of the following year *Spring Offensive* (1940) tells the story of the contribution of East Anglian farmers to the war effort. It is a film through which Jennings again engages with the themes of *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) and the concerns of surrealism. On the surface it is produced in the expository mode with its descriptive voice-over and scripted dialogue. It does however contain some more ambiguous and surreal moments that operate in the poetic mode. The opening shots picture haystacks as if they are bizarre anthropomorphic creatures and there is one sequence that, from a synthetic critical perspective, can be seen as the key surreal moment within an otherwise conventional Griersonian



narrative. The unusual sequence appears halfway through the film and follows some rather stilted dialogue filmed in a farm bureaucrat's office. The sequence concerns Grove Farm, an overgrown farmstead that becomes, under Jennings's direction, a mysterious *terrain vague*. We see the front door almost obscured by vegetation, then a sequence of shots in which the camera tracks back from farm equipment, tractors and fences engulfed by ivy and weeds. The rural decline signified by the unmoving cart is one theme of the film but, in the film's narrative, this decline is arrested by the organized efforts of the wartime government. This motif appears to have had a deeper significance for Jennings as the same image appears in his contemporary poem *Autumn 1939*.

A derelict cart with dead grass entwined in its great wheels: plants and grasses which had climbed up in the spring-time and been upheld by the spokes, flowered in the summer and now died in October. The cart unmoved all the year round – the wheels unmoved and unmoving – lit and unlit with the daily light of the great sun.... (Jackson 1993, p. 295)

Jennings builds on the earlier sequences of a steam-powered traction engine that sits in the field as if an image from *Pandæmonium* (Jennings, 1985), and develops this symbolism into the most ambiguous and poetic sequence of the film. In the first shot of the sequence, the camera tracks across still water, the farmhouse mysteriously reflected in the leaf-strewn pond. There is a dissolve to a side view of the farmhouse and then a close-up of the disused front door. Following on from the shots of the derelict farm equipment, Jennings dissolves into a sequence of shots tracking back from and alongside mysterious-looking fields thick with brambles. Over this sequence Jennings imposes a Mass-Observation style voice-

over. Speaking in a working-class regional dialect, the voice-over talks about the effects of his absence during the First World War and how the land has “got the master of us now”. The overall effect is of a voice from the past describing a once occupied landscape that now lies overgrown as if something from a mythical tale. The images of fields and farm equipment shrouded in mist and brambles recalls the Gothic trope of the derelict castle and is another example of an uncanny effect created through the defamiliarisation of the everyday. The film also has a number of shots that illustrate Jennings’s attempt to define the Anglicised modernist iconography discussed earlier. We see the plough, the windmill, the harvest field and the horse and towards the end of the film there is an eerie depiction of a mute scarecrow; his head bandaged in sacking; the silent soundtrack leaves the symbolism of the functional folk sculpture open to interpretation. *Spring Offensive* is a film in which Jennings is able to weave his own concerns - as expressed in *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) - and interpretations of the symbolic domain (in the Grove Farm sequence) into a public information film about land use during wartime.

Jennings’s following film, *Welfare of the Workers* (1940), depicts a different aspect of Jennings’s relationship to surrealist ideology. The film is an argument for the rights of workers and makes the connection between attacks on the liberty of the working class and attacks on thought; the connection that Breton outlines in his essay *What is Surrealism?* (1936a). Jennings’s film supports the rights fought for by trade unions and the voice-over argues that the alternative to the current situation in Britain would be “the black-out of liberty”. Despite the fact that

workers are now asked to give up some rights in order to fight the tyranny of the Nazis, the film explores the ways that workers are being supported during wartime. Although it includes some elements of popular culture, Mass-Observation and the themes of *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985), the film mainly emphasises the government's message that the workers are important agents in the continuing fight for liberty.

As the year progresses and filmmaking is established as a full time occupation for Jennings, his next work is *London Can Take It!* (1940)<sup>4</sup>. This film has a voice-over narrated by an American correspondent and describes the everyday life of Londoners on one day after enduring five weeks of the blitz. The opening shots of the city and its inhabitants are similar to a number of shots in *Listen to Britain* (1942). Quentin Reynolds's voice-over approaches the experience of the home front with a resigned lyricism, describing "the music they play every night in London; the symphony of war". The target audience for the film is undoubtedly the American general public and the film reportedly "became an enormous success in the United States" (Hodgkinson & Sheratsky, 1982, p. 52). The few surreal moments in the film come after we see a family waking in an air-raid shelter. Jennings illustrates the notion of the "revenge on culture – the surrealism of the blitz" (Walker, 2007, pp. 138-159) through shots of demolished buildings; life torn opened and rearranged. Perhaps one of the film's most well known images is that of a London bus thrown into the front of a terraced house. The bus is shown emerging from a pile of rubble and surrounded by scattered, helmeted

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative, shorter, version *Britain Can Take It* was also released.

figures. Jennings also shows us a stylish young lady in furs and a young man wearing a bowler hat and sporting an umbrella travelling to work along Oxford Street perched on the back of a speeding horse-drawn cart. There are other touches that illustrate the strangeness of wartime London such as the shot of a woman entering a shop through a smashed window as a man passes carrying a dog under his arm. Although the film has a conventional day-in-the-life, 24-hour documentary narrative and a clear polemic in its call for support from America, there are a few moments within it in which Jennings illustrates the surreal ambience of the bombed city.

Jennings's first film of 1941 is more overtly propagandist response to the bombing of Britain by the Luftwaffe, particularly a response to the terrible devastation wrought on Coventry in November 1940. *Heart of Britain* (1941) directly displays British stoicism and resistance to the air war being waged by Germany on Britain. The film was the first wartime project that Jennings was in charge of throughout the production process and was defined by the raid on Coventry. Jennings had started filming in Liverpool in October 1940 and happened to be in the middle of production for *Heart of Britain* when, on November 14<sup>th</sup> 1940, Coventry suffered its most severe bombardment. This coincidence is played out in the structure of the film, particularly in the placement, at the heart of the film, of a 360-degree pan around the aftermath of the raid on Coventry. The opening three minutes depict the hard-working people of Britain in a sequence of shots of the pastoral and industrial landscape intercut with talking-head scripted monologues, this sequence is quite conventional as a GPO

documentary when compared with the more ambiguous nature of his earlier *Spare Time* (1939). Three minutes into the film there is a brief but strangely affecting long shot of two lookout men, standing on the roof of a factory, dwarfed by a huge brick chimney, they scan the skies with binoculars. After a sequence depicting Lancashire “mill girls” playing in an air raid shelter in defiance of Goering’s Luftwaffe, we see the Manchester Hallé Orchestra playing Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Jennings uses this music (music that the voice-over describes as illustrating “the genius of Germany that was”) over a central 60-second sequence of the ruins of Coventry. This central sequence is tightly constructed as a lyrical and emotive montage: Jennings cuts from the orchestra playing the opening bars of the symphony to a slow, steady pan around the desolate ruins of Coventry. The shot is the longest continuous shot in the film and has no contextualizing voice-over, the pace of editing parallels the music, as a series of close-ups and medium shots show buildings torn open by the bombs. Interiors have become exterior as the domestic world that featured in *Spare Time* is torn open by the horror of war. A clock sits on the upstairs mantelpiece of a bedroom that lies open to the world in a clear illustration of the surrealism of the blitz. As the symphonic extract develops, Jennings introduces shots of people repairing, recovering and getting on with life. As the voice-over returns, the final shot in this sequence is of a mug of tea being drawn from an urn in close-up.

The final three minutes of the film are built around Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus and emphasise the ways in the people of Britain will fight back against the German attacks. *Heart of Britain* has a structure that appears to tell the story of its

production: Jennings sets out to make a film about the stoicism of Northern England as a further development from *London Can Take It* (1940), he encounters a devastating historical event and then formulates a response to this in the final section of the film. The most affective elements of the film are found in its juxtaposition of sound and image and these are further developed in Jennings's next two films. *Words for Battle* (1941) and *Listen to Britain* (1942).

In *Words for Battle* Jennings directly engages with his interest in literature and British history. The film utilises extracts from poetry and prose works by Camden, Milton, Blake, Browning, Kipling, Churchill and Lincoln, applying them to a montage of shots including archive and new material. Laurence Olivier performs the voice-over narration and the film has a clear structure that develops from its opening sequence where we see the clouds above England to the closing shot of people crossing the road. The first literary extract, taken from William Camden's *The Beauties of the Isle of Britain* (1568), describes the topography of Britain and is illustrated relatively literally by shots of pasture, coastline and towns. There is no surrealist ambiguity in the juxtapositions of the initial sequence. The second section of the film uses a quote from Milton's *Areopagitica* (1664), a polemical text written at the time of the English Civil War that argues against censorship and for the freedom of the press. The extract chosen by Jennings is not so much an anti-censorship message but more of a call to arms. Olivier's voice-over is as follows...

Methinks I see in my mind a mighty and puissant nation rousing herself  
like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I

see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam.

This text is illustrated by a sequence of shots of British airmen gathered around their Hawker Hurricane fighter plane as they shield their eyes from the midday sun. The shots of pilots have a strong Soviet-style composition in the dramatic natural lighting and low camera angle. The pilots in this sequence are depicted as types; they are handsome heroic young men rather than the quirky individuals that we often see in Jennings's depiction of the working classes at war. The voice-over continues...

...while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.

This text is illustrated using library shots of Nazi leaders, their symbols and parades. The images of overdressed Nazi leaders are followed by a sequence of shots of evacuees, leaving London and living happily in the countryside. This powerful appeal to emotions is accompanied by a reading from William Blake's *And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time* (c.1808) ending with the line "Till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." The next author is Robert Browning, whose poem *Home-thoughts, from the Sea* examines two sites linked to British patriotism (Cape Trafalgar and the Rock of Gibraltar) and asks the question "how can I help England?". Rudyard Kipling's *The Beginnings* with the repeated line "the English began to hate" is accompanied by chilling images of the

devastation of the blitz and clearly parallels the final section of *The Heart of Britain* (1941). Kipling's words are immediately followed by Olivier's rendition of an extract from Churchill's speech given to the House of Commons the previous year, commonly known as *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*. This extract is also illustrated fairly objectively with shots of the landscape, workers and soldiers. Churchill's speech ends with the assertion that the New World will rescue and liberate the old and Jennings ends his film with an extract from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The images in this final sequence that accompany the words of Lincoln are potent yet understated. There are Mass-Observation style shots of soldiers and civilians strolling purposefully through London, laughing and chatting, unaware of the cameras. In one of the most disconcerting brief sequences of the film, we see tanks rolling past the Houses of Parliament. What is most effective about this sequence is the use of sound; the transition from voice-over and music to the recorded sound of the tank's tracks rolling across tarmac creates an emotion that is more powerful than sum of the individual components from which the sequence is constructed.

Although there is a distinctly propagandist element to this film and it is clearly structured and signposted as an anthology of writings by specific authors, it is possible to explore the underlying arguments of Jennings's cinematic tract as an attempt to bring the selected literary texts to life and stimulate a concrete response in the viewer. He opens with an unsentimental descriptive piece about the nation's topography and follows this with an extract from Milton's call for the freedom of the press that hints at the rousing of a sleeping giant. The following section using



an extract from William Blake's *And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time* could be read as hawkish: Blake's poem is associated with English nationalism and, accompanied by Sir Hubert Parry's music, has been adopted as a hymn across the political spectrum in Britain. But the poem is also a work associated with revolutionary mysticism; Blake was a supporter of the French revolution and has been discussed as an antecedent of surrealism. Gascoyne says that the Surrealists' libertarian attitude towards sex is "almost identical with that of the Marquis de Sade or William Blake" (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 67). He also argues that "there is a very strong Surrealist element in English literature; one need only quote Shakespeare, Marlowe, Swift, Young, Coleridge, Blake, Beddoes, Lear and Carroll to prove this contention." (Gascoyne 1935/2000, p. 94). This connection between Blake and surrealist thought is suggested by Jennings in a number of his writings where he examines Blake's use of metaphor and symbolism to explore the relationship between the spiritual and the material. Breton quotes Hegel on this topic in *Surrealist Situation of the Object* when he writes "art and poetry deliberately create a world of shadows, of phantoms, of fictitious likenesses" (Breton 1935b, p. 256).

Jennings's approach is to explore these same relationships in Blake's poetry; he writes in 1938 "for an animal regarded as a machine at the time of the industrial revolution see Blake's *Tiger*" (quoted in Jackson 1993, p. 226). Speaking on the radio in the same year, Jennings said, "When we repeat 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright', we're not talking about a *real* tiger, we're talking about ourselves," (quoted in Jackson 1993, p. 260). The use of Blake and other writers by Jennings

in *Words for Battle* is propagandist, but not necessarily at odds with surrealist thought. In *Surrealist Situation of the Object* Breton argues that Surrealism allows the subjective, poetic or lyrical form to be objectified and, through the dialectical reconciliation of perception and representation, initiates a response in the historical world. The poetic texts used in Jennings's film create new associations through the combination of text and image. In Breton's words, the images and texts used in the film "urgently call for something to answer them in outer reality" (Breton 1935b, p. 278).

Putting aside the conservative nature of Churchill, Kipling and Browning, the selection of texts is relatively low-key patriotism given the context of Britain in 1941, with the very real threat of an imminent Nazi invasion. The portrait of Britain in *Words for Battle* is one of quiet stoicism; it is not an overt call for nationalism or Aryan supremacy but rather an explanation of the nature of the British revolutionary temperament and the reasons why the British nation will not be defeated by the forces of fascism. Although all of this may appear jingoistic, it should be seen in the historical context as a work of propaganda aimed not solely at a home audience but also specifically at the American audience as an attempt to call for support from the American military in the fight against fascism. This rather low-key attitude to propaganda was typical of Grierson's documentary movement in general as can be seen in films by other directors such as *Ordinary People* (1941). In Jennings's work however there is a distinctly poetic approach to the construction of the films that is not as evident in the works of others wartime directors. His attempt to find a new use for historical texts in combination with

contemporary footage can be seen as an attempt to apply surrealist techniques to help realise an urgent political priority. To use Goudal's terms discussed above: the film is visual in its foregrounding of visual and text images, it is illogical in the imaginative combination of these concrete elements and it is pervasive in the way that it crosses temporal and national boundaries in order to explore the social subconscious of Britain.

*Listen to Britain* (1942): The Surrealist Sublime

It is argued above that in Jennings's work from 1934 to 1939 we see an exploration of ideas that come to fruition in his film *Spare Time* (1939). By the same token, in Jennings's films from 1939 to 1941, we can see further developments through which Jennings hones and consolidates this new poetic approach to documentary filmmaking. The films of this period are produced under the historical exigencies of war and the threat of an imminent invasion. Jennings's response to this historical situation results in an exploration of film montage as nationalist propaganda but this runs in tandem to the further development of his interests in Mass-Observation and the symbolic domain of British culture. These concerns are evident in the films that he directed following *Spare Time* (as discussed above) but are most clearly articulated in what is probably Jennings's best-known film *Listen to Britain* (1942). The film started life in 1941 as a relatively straightforward five-minute documentary project depicting the lunchtime concerts by Myra Hess held at the National Gallery. After some disruption to the production of this planned film, *Listen to Britain* evolves through a series of treatments written by Jennings and McAllister before eventually being released in 1942.

*Listen to Britain* has been described as a "bugle-call film" (Barnouw 1993, p. 139) but, although it opens with the sound of a bugle call, it is far from being a call to action for warriors. The film functions as a portrait of a nation: a poetic observation of Britain on one day at a particular point in time. The opening bugle call soon gives way to the sounds of everyday life. Over the title graphics we hear

the sounds of children playing, a dog barking and muffled conversation. An incongruous foreword is now interjected at the start of the film, narrated by the Canadian civil servant Leonard Brockington. Brockington is filmed sitting uncomfortably in a large painted chair; leaning on a silk cushion he narrates a description of the film's content. He describes the film as "the war song of a great people" and this overtly rhetorical introduction goes against the content of the film that follows. *Listen to Britain* is a film that was deemed too subtle for an international or home audience to the extent that this dissonant foreword was tacked on by a "nervous civil servant" (Hodgkinson & Sheratsky 1982, p. 59). Ken Cameron explains that the film was rejected after it was completed as it had no voice-over commentary and that "this was the only reason" (Hodgkinson & Sheratsky 1982, p. 59) for the inclusion of the foreword.

The opening shot of the film proper is of a tree blowing in the summer breeze, then wheat waving in the sun. We hear the sounds of a summer day, the engine noise of fighter planes approaching as we cut to a shot of Spitfires flying overhead. We then see a farmer and two female members of the land army harvesting potatoes from a ploughed field. Jennings<sup>5</sup> then cuts to a shot of two observers who are presented as if they are two moles peering from a mound of earth, a bunker from which they are spying an orderly formation of British fighter planes that soar above their heads. The images of rural life are similar to those used in *The Farm* (Jennings, 1938) with the addition of a military presence and, instead of an

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<sup>5</sup> Although Stewart McAllister and Humphrey Jennings shared the directorial and editing credits for the film, I am using Jennings throughout discussion of the film to stand for Jennings and McAllister without wishing to underplay McAllister's input into the film.

explicatory voice-over, Jennings uses only the sound recorded on location. This use of sound collage continues throughout the film, developing in its complexity and symbolism. The rumbling of the engines fades as the fighters climb into the clouds and we are presented with a shot of a country cottage as a radio broadcast announces the BBC news. We do not hear the news report as the broadcast swiftly dissolves into the sound of a dance band playing mixed with the noise of a distant aircraft engine. Over this soundtrack we see waves lapping on the shore, two off duty soldiers sitting on a bench looking out to sea as the sun sets and an air-raid warden who puts on his greatcoat and helmet.

The next sequence of the film explores the leisure activities of the working class at war. We are shown a poster advertising a half-price offer for members of H.M. Forces in uniform before a cut takes us into the ballroom at Blackpool. This sequence clearly parallels the earlier ballroom scene in *Spare Time* but in *Listen to Britain*, the dance hall is filled with soldiers in uniform as well as civilians. The sequence illustrates the activities of ordinary people in their spare time but unlike in the earlier film, there is no contextualizing voice-over and no need to explore spare time as an escape from work for downtrodden workers. Dancing has now become a release, a form of self-expression and defiance in the face of an external enemy. None of this is made explicit but all is implied through the presentation of people to themselves via cinema at a particular historical moment. We hear snatches of conversation and see soldiers and girls flirting in close up as well as a Mass-Observation style exploration of the dancers on the floor of the ballroom as the music segues into the song *Roll Out the Barrel*: a rather understated song, the

English version of a Czech polka that could hardly be called “the war song of a great people”. The sequence is shot in deep focus and we can pick out a full range of British society moving in tandem around the large ballroom. As the line “’cause the gang’s all here” is sung, we cut back to the outside world where two helmeted wardens are watching the night sky on the coastline as the scene fades to black.

The next scene opens with a fade from black to the ill-lit world of the coal miner. In scenes similar to those featured in *Spare Time*, we see miners heading to work, a string of lights illuminate the dark tunnel as the moonlight plays on the slate roofs outside. The mine’s winding gear (one of the repeating motifs of Jennings’s films that could stand alongside the plough and the horse in his attempt to explore the symbolic domain of British culture) is shown against the night sky as we hear the sounds of train signals and points being changed. The train signal against the night sky acts as a graphic match to the winding gear, and then a dark train appears from the distance, moving slowly from left to right to obscure the heavy clouds that lie along the horizon. A dissolve take us to the interior of the train where off-duty soldiers are singing “Home on the Range”. The soldiers look relaxed and casual. As the song continues we catch snatches of conversation; a soldier with a Scottish accent and a cigarette stuck to his bottom lip talks about a “big electric lamp” before a piano accordion and yodeling soldier join in with the seemingly improvised rendition. As the performance is gathering momentum, the sound and image dissolve back to the exterior of the train as it pulls off into the dark, its black bulk obscuring the night sky. The film then cuts to an aircraft

factory where men are assembling a bomber. The sound of construction segues into the sound of the aeroplane's engines as a swift cut shows a bomber leaving for a raid. The aeroplane disappears into the dark sky, moving from right to left as a response to the train's movement earlier in this section.

The next segment of the film features another of Jennings's recordings of wistful and melancholy musical performances, a motif that threads through *Spare Time* and *The Silent Village* (1943) amongst other films. A uniformed woman is sitting in an ambulance station overlooked by historical statues and ensconced in an ancient building constructed from solid stone. She sings the pastoral Welsh folk song *The Ash Grove* as a group of ambulance women sit on chairs around her, knitting and looking pensively downwards. The film cuts to a close up shot of the women's helmets hanging on a rack and then back to a close up of the group listening to the plaintive melody. The chimes of Big Ben ring out over London as the sun rises and the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster appears from a darkened sky. This immediately dissolves into a shot of radio masts in the landscape as we hear a radio broadcast "This is London calling". The sun rises over the Thames and the film cuts back to the Palace of Westminster shrouded by scaffolding as if parliament itself has become a radio mast broadcasting democracy to the world. After brief glimpses of the Thames we hear the sound of the BBC World Service and see a bank of valves and amplifiers. As the voices overlap in the languages of the world we see the clouds, the air through which the fighter planes had raced in the opening of the film and the air that now takes the voice of Britain around the world. The sequence fades to black.



The next sequence fades up to show a low angle viewpoint, looking up through the canopy of a peaceful forest; we hear nothing but the ambient sound of the woodland. The film cuts from the countryside to an industrial town in the north of England, chimneys are smoking and a man leads two dray horses over cobbled streets. Workers leave the factory gates, human feet clopping over the same cobbles. A high angle shows us the panorama of the city as, on the soundtrack, a popular song encouraging exercise fades up and we move to ground level where we track along the street, following a man in a suit wearing a homburg with a tin hat and gas mask slung over his shoulder, he strides out with some purpose. Before we can ascertain the purpose we cut to a shot of a power station and then a factory. As the sound of the factory releasing steam continues, we see leaves blowing in the breeze and then cut to an interior where a woman is making tea.

The woman looks out of a window towards a school where we see and hear children skipping in an organised dance routine. They stop and slap, clapping in time to the music, we cut back to the woman looking wistfully at the children playing then down at a photograph of her husband in military uniform. The man in the picture is wearing the kilt and Tam o'Shanter of a Highland regiment. The scene cuts back to a medium shot of the children performing their country-dance and the sound of the dance merges with the noise of a military convoy rolling down the town's High Street. There is a cutaway to a low angle shot looking up at an ancient half-timbered house; the windows are open and the net curtains billow outwards. The camera then moves inside a tearoom, looking out through leaded

glass at the convoy's progress. The sound of the armoured vehicle's tracks is amplified as we move in to closer details of the tracks and a small girl's smiling face. The camera then appears to join the convoy, racing along the road as the soundtrack joins the radio programme *Music While You Work*. As the soundtrack has the line "calling all workers!" we are racing along the road, passing under a railway bridge just as a steam train is passing overhead. This impressive tracking shot parallels the images of model trains used in Jennings's earlier film *Locomotives* (1934) and again suggests the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico or Andre Kertesz's photograph *Muedon* (1928). Through the use of a dissolve as the moving camera passes under the bridge, we board the train and pull into London. A further dissolve takes us to a factory where music, machine and workers become one through a series of close-up shots: tannoy, worker, machine, tannoy. The scene cuts back to the train passing by Battersea Power Station, the music fades out as the sound of the factory machinery continues, the scene fades to black and a whistle announces a new section of the film.

The next sequence starts with a series of observational shots of uniformed men and women sitting at a railway terminus, smoking, drinking tea, wandering and waiting. We quickly move to a large factory, to a works canteen where Flanagan and Allen are singing on stage. The section featuring this performance runs for over ninety seconds and, as such, is one of the longest continuous sequences in the film. The Flanagan and Allen sequence is used by Jennings to represent popular culture and the audience's response. The two singers, whose career started in music hall revue before moving on to work on radio and later television,

typify British working class culture of the 1940s. They appear in Jennings's film as two odd characters, a straight man and a funny man, they sway in unison as they sing *Round the Back of the Arches* a well-known song from which the audience takes obvious pleasure. As they sing we are shown a chalkboard listing typical British food:

Scotch Broth  
Fried Cod and Chips  
Grilled Sausages  
Greens  
Boiled Potatoes  
Lemon Pudding  
Jam Sauce

This list is a further example of the surrealists' interest in the inventory. Louis Aragon extolls the charms of the hand-painted menus that he finds displayed in the cafés of the Parisian arcades: "one of the charms of cafés lies in these little placards one finds hanging all over the place" (Aragon *Paris Peasant*, 1926/1994, p. 79). Whereas the signs reproduced in Aragon's work list a range of cocktails, Jennings's hand-drawn placard lists an inventory of traditional British food. Aragon's explorations of the working class bars of the Parisian arcades are transposed by Jennings to the work canteens of wartime Britain.

We are then shown close-up shots of the audience enjoying the performance before cutting back to a view from the stage where the audience is joining in by whistling along to the chorus. The workers in the factory canteen are not depicted

as noble stereotypes of revolutionary fervor; they are represented as quirky individuals: characters that depict realism rather than the fantasy mythopoeic population hinted at in the film's foreword. The importance of this sequence to Jennings can be seen in the way that he revisited in later years, producing a number of sketches of the subject that are resolved in a painting that hangs in Bolton museum, entitled *Listen to Britain* (c.1949). The painting depicts the audience at the Flanagan and Allen concert realized in the cubist style of Jennings's post-war painting.

The edit from the Flanagan and Allen sequence to the next sequence is one of the most effective in the film and is seen as a radical transition in the way that it segues from the popular culture of Flanagan and Allen performing in a works canteen to a performance of Beethoven by Dame Myra Hess at the National Gallery where the queen of England is in attendance. Ken Cameron commented,

...the cutting on the chord from Flanagan and Allen – it's a beautiful cut. Nowadays it'd probably be accepted as ordinary, but it was quite revolutionary then. (Vaughn 1983, p. 83)

The linking of disparate locations, of high and popular culture, is used to demonstrate the unity of the British people in wartime, to indicate the egalitarian nature of British society (in the same way that the cat sequence in *The First Days* (Jennings, Watt, & Jackson, 1939) attempts to link the royal family with everyday life). At around two minutes, this is the longest continuous sequence in the film, linked as it is by Hess's performance. As the music continues we see the ordinary

soldiers and civilians working together, keeping calm, eating sandwiches and drinking cups of tea on the steps of the National Gallery. War, as the “revenge on culture” (Walker 2007, p. 138), is illustrated by the smashed windows, empty frames and stacks of sandbags that fill the National Gallery. The neatly stacked sandbags and huge ornate empty frames look like a surrealist installation or a sculptural work by Joseph Beuys, a repeat of the uncanny sequences of the same gallery in *The First Days*. As the music reaches its conclusion, the camera moves outside to a summer afternoon in Trafalgar Square; people go about their everyday business, barrage balloons float above the docks, workers keep working in the factories and the sound of a tank being assembled starts to drown out the Beethoven recital, as the tanks leave the factory a new musical sequence replaces the previous one: we join a marching band heading through a town High Street, past pubs and a sign reading “Feed Your Dog on Spillers Shapes”. The band marches on playing *A Life on the Ocean Wave* and, in the most militaristic few seconds of the whole film, we briefly see a troop of Infantrymen marching at arms behind the band. In the next sequence the soundtrack evolves into a *musique concrete* audiovisual montage as the sound of steel being hammered morphs into a choral version of *Rule Britannia* to which we see fields of wheat, potteries, factories and finally the skies above Britain. The ending of the film becomes a call to arms, a slightly jingoistic element in an otherwise lyrical, reflective and observational work.

If *Listen to Britain* is to be considered Jennings’s “unrivalled masterpiece” (Jackson 2004, p. 246), or at least what Hillier describes as the thematic and

stylistic climax of his work up to this point (1972, p. 86), then it is best to again briefly situate the film in relation to his previous work before exploring the film's relationship with surrealism in more detail. In discussing the films leading up to *Spare Time*, I have taken a somewhat archaeological approach to unearthing traces of Jennings's interests in surrealism. A surrealist reading of these early films infers that Jennings is approaching filmmaking in an intuitive way and that one can excavate thematic and stylistic concerns in these works that are evidence of his dialectical relationship with surrealist thought. This relationship is evinced in Jennings's depictions of ambiguous beauty and the exploration of the everyday life of individuals. It can also be seen in his attempts to integrate the concerns of his literary collage work *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) into his films along with his own corpus of British modernist symbols (all of which has been discussed above). The concerns of these early intuitive works culminate in *Spare Time*; a film that articulates a more engaged social approach. This approach is the result of the debates and divisions within the Surrealist Group in England and Jennings's response to these concerns. Jennings's involvement with Mass-Observation is a consequence of these debates and is channeled into *Spare Time*. I have argued that this film illustrates Jennings's move towards Breton's more "reasoning" (Breton 1936a, p. 50) surrealist epoch and that the relationship between *Spare Time* and notions of the everyday further demonstrate Jennings's dialectical relationship to surrealism. The concerns of *Spare Time* are subsequently developed in the films that Jennings makes between 1939 and 1942 and these transitional films are indicative of his exploration of surrealist ideas that combine with the exigencies of wartime and culminate in *Listen to Britain*.

It is possible to consider *Listen to Britain* as something of the cinematic equivalent of the *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities. The film is a cinematic collage that has developed from Jennings's earlier work, connecting his interest in assembling a British modernist iconography with Mass-Observation, internationalism and surrealism. The film operates mainly on the level of metaphor, metonym and synecdoche, placing its image objects into a carefully constructed musical cabinet where the whole figures the desires and fears of a British nation on the edge of extinction. *Listen to Britain*, in its original form as intended by Jennings, can be considered a text that is uncertain in its meaning. If we consider that the appended foreword was added to stop the film bewildering its audience, we can argue that if we remove this introductory contextualizing voice-over it returns to ambiguity. This connects to the notion outlined by Roger Cardinal that "Surrealism typically postulates bewilderment as a precondition of insight" (Cardinal 2008, p. 67). The film without its introduction is an exploration of a specific place at a specific time but it is constructed as a collage, "the paradigm of all modes of surrealist creativity" (Cardinal 2008, p. 67). Rather than simply allowing the film to be a poetic meditation on one location, Jennings's film compiles a catalogue of instances from a particular place and time. Each shot refers to the real world but the total effect through the use of collage is that of a microcosm or *wunderkammer* of the British home front at the height of World War Two. This is all the more so for its position as a record of the historical event, returned to again as a point of reference in documentaries and films such as *Of Time and the City* (Davies, 2008). Davies's film is a eulogy to the city of

Liverpool using archive material to construct a sense of place and, in an interview discussing the film, he states, “My template for the film was Humphrey Jennings’s nineteen-minute-long *Listen to Britain*” (quoted in Quart 2009).

The film has a diurnal structure, yet the progression of the day is never entirely coherent. We hop illogically from one location to another, glimpsing situations and drawing connections through the juxtapositions. *Listen to Britain* depicts a series of everyday objects, people and situations that become strange, uncanny through their relationships and particularly through their relationship to the unspoken external event, the World War. Jennings’s film contains what can be described as surreal moments, such as the shots of empty frames and sandbags in the National Gallery, but these are neither accidentally surreal nor do they take their lyricism from “The shabby arsenal of old poetic ideas” (Aragon 1918, p. 29).

The image objects that Jennings has collected for *Listen to Britain* are more akin to the wartime work of the photographer Lee Miller that were published (along with the work of other photographers) in the book *Grim Glory* (Carter 1941). This photo book illustrates wartime Britain through a sequence of documentary images that clearly parallel Jennings’s film work and, as Miller was a close friend of Jennings and a key figure in British surrealism, this is not to be unexpected. *Grim Glory* is a book that follows the course of the war from 1939 to its publication in 1941 at the height of the blitz. It is illustrated using library images alongside a sequence of commissioned photographs taken by Lee Miller especially for the book. Miller’s photographs include some depictions of the aftermath of bombing



raids on London landmarks such as the Burlington Arcade but she also photographs the everyday surrealism of the blitz in her images of empty streets, blown-out windows, a crushed typewriter and shop mannequins standing in the street alongside discarded furniture. One of her photographs depicts a chalked newspaper sign that reads “LONDONS NO NIGHT RAID. ONE NIGHT OF LOVE” and, in another, she peers through barbed wire at two geese standing in front of a deflated barrage balloon. The image is captioned “the geese that laid a silver egg” and the majority of the photographs in the book are accompanied by similar humorous slogans that appear to be aimed at defusing the horror and uncertainty of the experience of war. This mood of cheery stoicism also runs through the voice-over narration of films such as *London Can Take It!* (Jennings, 1940) but *Listen to Britain* takes an altogether more poetic approach to the zeitgeist. It is, of all Jennings’s works, the film that most foregrounds the visual. It is illogical in that it functions as a series of visual and audio images. In this way it parallels Cardinal’s description of surrealist collage as an approach that “allows the rational viewer to grasp its meaning while still preserving its irrational heterogeneity, its taint of the hybrid” (Cardinal 2008, p. 68).

*Listen to Britain* can be described as expressing an “ethic compatible with surrealism” (Hammond 1978, p. 3) in both its exploration of the strange beauty of wartime Britain and in its use of formal rigour: juxtaposing sounds and images in an attempt to reconcile opposites such as high and low culture, the past and the future, war and peace. In a development of Breton’s desire to resolve the states of dream and reality, Jennings attempts to combine a sequence of oppositional states

into one “absolute reality, a *surreality*” (Breton 1924, p. 14). There is desire present in the film but this is not however erotically charged, rather it is a desire for freedom and an attempt to deal with the political concerns outlined in Breton and Trotsky’s FIARI statement (1938). Although I have mentioned above that the film has a relationship to the work of Lee Miller as seen in *Grim Glory* (Carter 1941), Jennings does not include much in the way of the bizarre, “prophotographic” (Bate 2004, pp. 25 - 28) imagery that features in *Grim Glory* and, to some extent in Jennings’s earlier films *London Can Take It!* (1940) and *The Heart of Britain* (1941). In *Listen to Britain* Jennings’s use of surrealism is more of a subtle attempt to integrate the philosophical and technical developments that he has engaged with in the years leading up to 1941 and to put these to use in the fight against “reactionary forces armed with the entire arsenal of modern technology” (Breton & Trotsky 1938, p. 100). It is here, in this subtlety that we can sense the development of Jennings’s approach to surrealism and film: *Listen to Britain* (1942) is simultaneously the culmination of his previous work and the application of surrealist thought to a wartime documentary film.

There are a number of ways in which Jennings’s earlier encounters with surrealist thought are evident in *Listen to Britain*. Firstly there is the political engagement of the film in relation to the FIARI manifesto. Although the idea of producing propaganda films for the British state may very well be “alien to surrealism” (Richardson 2006, p. 86), an alternative way in which to consider Jennings’s work would be to reverse the polarity and consider his intervention in the organized mechanism of state propaganda as one that subtly undermines the practice by

bringing into this system of strong focused messages, an element of uncertainty. This approach is what Breton and Trotsky refer to in 1938 as “true art” (1938 p. 101), work which...

is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and mankind in its time. True art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. (Breton & Trotsky 1938, p. 101)

The radical nature of Jennings’s uncertain propaganda is clearly illustrated by the manner in which the Ministry of Information intervened and added the Leonard Brockington foreword. The political aspect of Jennings’s work is therefore relatively low-key and it is as if he has smuggled surrealist ideas and the accompanying desire for liberty into his film. Rather than explicitly expressing a radical political tendency, he has carried this out by employing elements of surrealist thought in the production of a lyrical film. Whereas his earlier film *Words for Battle* (1941) was constructed from a series of pre-existing written texts narrated by Laurence Olivier and illustrated with “contemporary shots of RAF and bits from German newsreels” (Jennings 1941, p. 31), *Listen to Britain* is created from scratch as a film about music and people. Jennings describes *Listen to Britain* as “The picture about music” (Jennings 1942, p. 56) and, in a letter to his wife, he emphasizes that it has “no commentary” (Jennings 1941, p. 36). We should refer back to Breton’s description of the poet’s function and attempt to apply this to Jennings’s film. According to Breton, the poet’s function is as follows:

Borne by the current of his time, he will assume for the first time without distress the responsibility for the reception and transmission of signals which press upon him from the depth of souls. He will maintain at any price in each other's presence the two terms of the human relation, by whose destruction the most precious conquests would instantaneously become null and void: the objective awareness of realities, and their internal development in what, by virtue of a sentiment individual on one hand, universal on the other, is magical about it until proved otherwise. (Breton 1932b, p. 304)

We can consider the extract above as a template for Jennings's poetic approach in *Listen to Britain*. Firstly the film, as a response to the spirit of Britain in 1941, is clearly borne by the current of the times in which he is living and deals with the new perspective forced upon the population of Britain by the events of the Second World War, in particular the objective awareness of events on the home front. Jennings depicts the events "without stress" (Breton 1932b, p. 304); his approach to these events is restrained and he attempts to check his personal response through the collaborative nature of film work. We can see this self-restraint in operation in one of the comments that he makes in a letter written to his wife at the time of production: "Dal [Darymple] has been a tremendous help in a quiet way about tackling people and not straying off into landscapes or trick ideas" (Jennings, 1941, p. 31). We can see here how Jennings is reflecting on his previous work and taking a clear responsibility for the poetic function: the receiving and transmitting of the nation's thoughts. This technique of the distanced reporting of events allied to a restrained poetic eye for the moment is a clear example of poetic Mass-Observation in practice. In the context of *Listen to*

*Britain*, the “signals which press upon him from the depth of souls” (Breton 1932b, p. 304) should be seen as the very real fear and the resilient response of the people of Britain as experienced by Jennings on a daily basis in 1941. Jennings discusses these ideas in another of his letters:

Slowly – how slowly – but clearly enough England & Scotland & Wales are beginning to look at *life*: the way they did in 1400 – the way they have been unlearning for many centuries. But looking at life of what possibilities and what disasters. There is a kind of malaise in the air now like the wind worrying the leaves: ideas turning over: self-criticism: parties dissolving: the clouds changing. (Jennings 1941, p. 32)

Through *Listen to Britain*, Jennings, borne by the times in which he is living, is assuming the responsibility of receiving and transmitting the thoughts and fears from deep within the souls of everyday people. His film attempts to balance the objective depiction of realities with the internal response to those realities and project these back into reality through the cinema. Jennings’s films play in the cinema whose physical presence as a place where “the only *absolutely modern* mystery is being celebrated” (Breton 1951, p. 237) becomes the conducting wire of which Breton speaks in *Communicating Vessels* (1932), a dark space with soundproof doors and walls: designed to make the connection between internal and external realities possible. Breton describes how the cinema spectator becomes “That solitary spectator lost amidst faceless strangers” (Breton 1951, p. 237) and asks the question as to how this individual and the rest of the audience can “become at once part of an adventure that is neither his nor theirs?” (Breton 1951, p. 237). The important distinction to make here in relation to *Listen to*

*Britain* is that at its time of release, it was communicating to the audience, via the vessel of cinema, an adventure that was their own. The audience could recognize themselves on screen and also their own experience through an act of filmmaking that is mythopoeic in the way that it creates a new national myth from a collage of everyday realities. The film is the height of Jennings's work in this technique and style and is followed by films that continue to engage with ideas relating to surrealism but which develop in a different direction. Through his use of music as a structuring theme (the musicality of the edit, the use of sound as *musique concrete* and the depiction of musical performances) Jennings is able to construct an image of human relations in *Listen to Britain* that is at once universal and individual.

Through this application of a restrained observation of reality, Jennings collects small poetic moments that allow the everyday to enter the realm of the symbolic. Avoiding the direct depiction of Britain under fire that features in the book *Grim Glory* (Carter, 1941) and his previous film *The Heart of Britain*, Jennings uses metonym and metaphor to explore the "signals which press upon him from the depth of souls" (Breton 1932b, p. 304). Linda Williams (1981) has developed a theory and analysis of surrealist film, particularly in relation to the films of Luis Buñuel, and I would like to take on board some of her ideas relating to metonym and metaphor and apply them to *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) in an attempt to develop the argument that the film has a clear relationship to surrealist ideas.

Williams suggests that surrealist film in general has been condemned by an enthusiastic love: the love of the medium and the love of surrealism (Williams 1981, p. xi). She also suggests that previous studies such as Kyrrou's *Le Surréalisme au Cinéma* (1953) have been too broad and that her aim is to examine the films that grew out of the "actual heyday" (Williams 1981, p. xiii) of the movement. I have outlined in chapter two how surrealism arrived and developed in England in the years immediately prior to World War Two. Jennings's films grew out of the actual heyday of British surrealism: his initial involvement with filmmaking is contemporaneous with the 1936 International surrealist exhibition in London. They too have been condemned by an enthusiastic love similar to the one that Williams describes (in the case of Jennings's films, a love that often manifests itself as nostalgia). There is an enthusiasm for documentary film making on the part of historians of British cinema and a more general nostalgia for the representations of wartime Britain that has become an integral element of the British heritage industry. These two enthusiasms tend to obscure the ways in which Jennings's films, in particular *Listen to Britain*, may be read through surrealism.

Williams discusses the ways that in surrealist film, "metaphoric or metonymic figures take precedence over diegesis or plot" (Williams 1981, p. xiv), exploring the way that these metaphors and metonyms operate is key to understanding the "latent desires that are the true subjects" (Williams 1981, p. xv) of surrealist films. *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) avoids diegesis and operates almost entirely on the level of metaphor and metonym. By exploring how the film

figures political desire through the image, we can consider the ways in which it can be considered a surrealist text.

In 1918 the French poet, Pierre Reverdy, wrote about the image in poetry as the bringing together of “two distant realities whose relationship the mind alone has grasped” (Williams 1981, p. 3). He was also interested in elementary cinematic montage as a parallel to this idea “the concrete juxtaposition of distant realities” (Williams 1981, p. 4). Philippe Soupault explored notions of how cinematic special effects such as those produced by Georges Méliès could disrupt space and time whereas Louis Aragon considered the more subtle use of the film medium by Chaplin. These three poet critics had taken their lead from Apollinaire’s enthusiasm for cinema such as the *Fantômas* films (Feuillade 1913-1914) in the journal *Les Soirées de Paris*. These pre-surrealist critical ideas are underpinned by the notion that film fragments are convincing records of reality and that their combination in a manner that opposes reality makes them all the more effective as figures in a disjunction that is different to the affect of Soviet montage techniques. It has been argued recently (Beattie 2010) that collage, as an aesthetic technique, is more important to an understanding of Jennings’s surrealism than the identification of individual moments of “denatured surrealism” (Beattie 2010, p. 27).

Jennings’ profound debt to Surrealism is evident within his films in the method of collage, a central strand of surrealist aesthetics. (Beattie 2010, p. 27)



Williams sees Breton's subsequent interest in automatic writing in relation to notions of collage or juxtaposition but also in parallel to Freud's notion of the unconscious's tendency to "discourse visually" (Williams 1981, p. 11). She traces the development in surrealism from verbal to visual juxtaposition through the use of collage, describing these as works of recombination that tend to result in *dépaysement* or disorientation, pointing out that automatic writing developed in this manner as a series of "mysteriously linked images" (Williams 1981, p. 13). This disorienting aspect of *Listen to Britain* has been discussed above and the film's use of the visual discourse to mirror the shared unconscious of a nation at war is one of its key features.

Williams posits Breton's manifesto *Soluble Fish* (1929) as a literary precursor to later surrealist films in that "it unites the spatial elements of image and the temporal elements of narrative in a discourse that deconstructs the usual function of each" (Williams 1981, p. 13). The aesthetics of surrealist film grow out of the model of the dream in their analogous uses of spatial and temporal discourses. We can sense a comparable aesthetic in the dream structure of *Listen to Britain*, its seamless transitions from location to location and its movement through time. Williams also poses the question of whether the dream and the film are able to escape the codified structures of their own language or whether they are structured by their discourse. She employs Lacanian interpretations of film and language to argue that the surrealists intended to cultivate the form of unconscious desire rather than its content (Williams 1981, p. 14). In surrealist film, desire functions as "a structured process in which the work of the image is of central importance"

(Williams 1981, p. 15). Dreams as a model for surreal films function not just symbolically (a dream sequence) or purely personally (the re-telling of a dream) but rather as an attempt to understand the dream as a system of communication different from verbal language. Williams discusses Goudal's essay "Surrealism and Cinema" (1925) as a thorough exploration of film's resemblance to dream "in language the foremost factor is the logical thread (the narrative) in cinema, the foremost factor is the image" (Williams 1981, p. 18). Williams asserts that it is not cinematic dream imagery that fascinates Goudal but:

more the resemblance between the film and the dream *in language* than *in content*: the fact that each proceeds through a succession of images that is a simulacrum of the real world but is also at the same time radically artificial. It is this quality of being more and less real than reality that film and dream have in common. (Williams 1981, p. 18)

Jennings's films up to and including *Listen to Britain* can be seen to possess this quality of being more *and* less real than reality, and it is this uncertainty that has caused an element of discomfort resulting in critical debates such as the one concerning the kazoo band sequence in *Spare Time* discussed above. The two key films (*Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*) that are discussed in some detail above clearly illustrate the way in which Jennings applies cinematic collage techniques to create a poetic documentary form. In the same way that Jennings's Mass-Observation work juxtaposes observed elements of reality in a manner that emphasises the resulting paradoxes; his cinematic collage works also juxtapose fragments of filmed reality resulting in a series of paradoxical relationships that lead us to explore the unconscious properties of the image fragments.

This means that illogical successions of images could come to replace the usual fictional goal of inspiring belief in the fiction that is behind the image in order to concentrate on the unconscious properties of the image itself. (Williams, 1981, p. 19)

Humphrey Jennings's films, from *Post Haste* (1934) to *Listen to Britain* (1942), concentrate on this "unconscious property" of the image. Informed by Mass-Observation's desire to "make of Surrealism something other than romanticised escapism, and of documentary something other than realist usefulness" (Walker 2007, p. 98), Jennings replaces documentary's conventional approach of instilling belief through images of reality that operate as rhetorical devices with a poetic approach informed by Surrealism. Jennings's understanding of the importance of the unconscious properties of the image is emphasised in his introduction to *Pandæmonium* (Jennings 1985) where he discusses how matter is transformed into an image, "reborn by Imagination: *turned into an image*" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxviii). For Jennings an image may take many forms (for example a written text, a photograph, a sound recording) but his concern is to collect "documents which illuminate" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxvi), images that have a "window-opening quality" (Jennings 1985, p. xxxvi). These ideas can be applied to *Listen to Britain*, a film that takes fragments of recorded reality and transforms them into an illuminating portrait of a moment when the clashes and conflicts of a world at war can be illustrated poetically through the means of documentary film production. Jennings is talking about his collection of images of the Industrial Revolution when he writes that there are moments in history that "suddenly show themselves

with extra clearness, and which through that clearness can stand as symbols for the whole inexpressible uncapturable process.” (Jennings 1985, p. xxxvi). This symbolic clarity also applies to the images that make up *Listen to Britain*. Jennings’s uses of cinema to create works of poetry should be seen in relation to his conception that “The history of poetry is itself a history of mechanisation and specialisation” (Jennings 1985, p. xxxvi) and that “the actual mental process of poetic production” (Jennings 1985, p. xxxvi) has hardly altered since the time of Homer. In *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) Jennings has found a moment when he felt able to record the conflict that was happening in the world, recording reality through an engagement with surrealism in a form that relates to the sublime. In recent books on avant-garde and British cinema, his work is often described as sublime, for example: Sara Barrow describes Jennings as “a sublime film-maker” (Barrow & White 2008, p. 41), Michael O’Pray discusses Jennings’s “penchant for sublime juxtaposition” (O’Pray 2003, p. 113) and Robert Shail describes how Jennings’s work reaches a peak “in the sublime *Listen to Britain*” (Shail 2007, p. 110). Before considering Jennings’s subsequent work, I would like to briefly sketch out the relationship between surrealism and the sublime in Jennings’s films and subsequently to trace how the relationship between surrealism and the uncanny can be applied to some of Jennings’s later films, specifically *The Silent Village*.

#### Jennings: The Sublime and the Uncanny

Just as surrealism is a difficult term to tie down, the sublime is an equally abstruse concept. Philip Shaw describes the ambiguity of the sublime as:

the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language. (Shaw 2006, p. 3)

This definition could quite reasonably be applied to the idea of surreality. Shaw (2006) discusses how the sublime is often associated with the transcendent, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and is evinced in the work of the romantic poets. Although Jennings came to blows with Herbert Read in his attempts to align surrealism with romanticism, there are parallels between romanticism and surrealism in surrealism's aspirations to the transcendent. We can see the importance of a version of beauty to surrealist thought in Breton's discussion of the phenomenon of surrealism as arising from the juxtaposition of two terms that create an image and how "The value of the image depends on the beauty of the spark obtained" (1924, p. 37). He describes surrealist reason as being able to apprehend the "luminous phenomenon" (1924, p. 37) that results from the juxtaposition of these terms. Much of the language of Breton's 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* alludes to the transcendent nature of the surrealist act. As much as Breton intimates the importance of applying surrealism to concrete action, the manifesto ends with the phrase "Existence is elsewhere" (Breton 1924, p. 47). Alongside the cod-encyclopaedic definition of surrealism offered earlier in the tract that emphasises a belief in "the omnipotence of dream"

(Breton 1924, p. 26), Breton's first manifesto clearly positions surrealism as a set of ideas that transcend reality.

If there is an element of sublime transcendence in surrealism, there is equally an immanence in surrealism where the "luminous phenomenon" (Breton 1924, p. 37) comes spontaneously from everyday experience. Shaw explores this approach to the sublime as the "postmodern sublime", where the expression that instils one with awe or lofty emotions is defined "not by its intimations of transcendence but rather by its confirmation of immanence, the sense of which the highest of the high is nothing more than an illusion brought about through our misperception of reality" (Shaw 2006, p. 3). We can position Jennings's work, in the form that reaches its apex in *Listen to Britain*, as sitting somewhere between the romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime, perhaps it is best described as the surrealist sublime in the way that it straddles the two approaches. Foster sees the surrealist sublime as analogous to convulsive beauty, "bound up with (the) trauma, anxiety and repetition" (Foster 1993, p. 28) of the photographic process. *Listen to Britain*'s immanence, rooted in reality, as a shadow of something that exists, is also a spectre that transcends reality: an image of something that no longer exists.

*Listen to Britain* has variously been described as both transcendent and awe-inspiring. Hillier describes the "tumultuous expression" (Hillier 1972, p. 89) of national unity expressed through *Listen to Britain* and Lady Forman describes how audiences felt the film to be a "distillation and also a magnification of their own experiences on the home front" (Jackson 2004, p. 253). Jackson describes the

film as Jennings's "first unblemished masterpiece", a work that "at once fulfilled and transcended its official function as propaganda" (Jackson 2004, p. 254). The film may be awe-inspiring and transcendent but it is also rooted in immanence, in the everyday experience of reality. It does, rather, avoid the idea that the transcendental is an illusion, however, in what can be seen as a further surrealist paradox, insisting that the transcendental is immanent. Shaw examines early, pre-romantic approaches to the sublime, specifically the writings of Longinus, as foregrounding the concealment of language and that, according to Longinus "For the sublime to arise, and for it to be sustained, speech must appear natural and unmotivated" (Shaw 2006, p. 28). If we apply this approach to Jennings's film, we can firstly consider the cinematic style, particularly the elements of Mass-Observation in *Listen to Britain* as appearing "natural and unmotivated" (Shaw 2006, p. 28). Secondly we can consider the collage style of Jennings's film, with its ambiguity of meaning, as allowing the audience to interpret the images as if the cinematic language is unmotivated by a specific propaganda message. Hillier (1972, p. 87) has pointed out that the rich ambiguity of Jennings's approach to cinematic montage offers a multiplicity of meanings rather than the "precise intellectual connection" (Hillier 1972, p. 87) of Eisenstein's montage. The metaphoric devices of *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942) may have a sublime effect but it is not the method that is sublime, rather it is the emotional state that results. This conception of the sublime parallels surrealism in that, as discussed above, there are no such things as surreal techniques or devices, it is rather that surreality arises from a relationship between things. A further equivalence between sublimity and surreality is the manner in which both terms

express themselves as being the “result of the co-implication of seemingly natural opposites” (Shaw 2006, p. 25). Shaw sees the sublime as being brought about by the tension between opposites such as “life and death, unity and fragmentation, God and man” (Shaw 2006, p. 25), Breton sees surreality as developing out of the resolution of opposite states such as dream and reality (Breton 1924, p. 14).

If Jennings’s work reaches its apogee of the surrealist sublime in *Listen to Britain*, his later masterpieces, films that would “equal, or even surpass it” (Jackson 2004, p. 254), are produced using a different approach. The films that follow *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942), particularly *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943) and *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943), work more through an engagement with the uncanny rather than the sublime. The development from the sublime to the uncanny in Jennings’s work can be traced through the notion of the liminal discussed earlier. There is an etymological link between sublime and liminal, both words deriving from the Latin *limen* which relates to a threshold, sill or cross-piece. Shaw traces the derivation of sublime to the lintel or top piece of a door, “Set or raised aloft” (2006, p. 1). The sublime relates to lofty thoughts but it is also refers to limits of knowledge, to the edge or liminality; a component of the uncanny as explored by Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919). In this essay, Freud explores the roots of the term uncanny through the German *unheimlich*. Freud mentions a particular usage of *heimlich* as both “of knowledge” and also “withdrawn from knowledge” (Freud 1919, p. 133). Hal Foster develops Freud’s discussion of the uncanny, applying it to surrealism in *Compulsive Beauty* (1993). Foster’s work will be used in an attempt to examine the two films that



Jennings directed following *Listen to Britain* as texts that engage with surrealism through the uncanny. They are films that depart from his earlier work in their scripted, linear narratives. They are the closest that Jennings approached to the feature film form yet they draw on his earlier documentary and Mass-Observation work, reconstructing recent history and engaging with speculative fiction.

It would be useful to briefly attempt to describe the field of the Freudian uncanny before attempting to excavate the uncanny from these films. Freud's essay opens with a definition of the uncanny as belonging to "the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (Freud 1919, p. 123). On a straightforward level, Jennings's later wartime films, particularly *The Silent Village*, can be seen to belong to this realm, to the very real fear and dread that is the experience of life during wartime. Freud goes on to explore the semantic roots of the term uncanny and the derivation of its German form, *unheimlich*, corresponding etymologically to the English term unhomely. From this semantic exploration, Freud concludes that "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 1919, p. 124). The difficulty in defining *unheimlich* concerns the paradoxical nature of the phrase in that it relates to "two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory but very different from each other" (Freud 1919, p. 132). These two sets of ideas are, on the one hand, the notion of the familiar, the homely or comfortable and, on the other hand, to that which is hidden or dangerous. In the uncanny, these two antonyms are coexistent: That which should be hidden or dangerous has come into the open and exists within the familiar and is "in some way a species of the

familiar” (Freud 1919, p. 134). This has been touched on above in discussions of surrealism in relation to the everyday and the sublime, particularly the way in which a certain ambiguous liminality can be seen as crucial to a surrealist interpretation of the everyday. Freud’s essay fuses psychoanalysis with literary criticism in an attempt to engage with the uncanny as a particular emotional response to a text. Todorov considers a similar field in his work on the fantastic but the key difference between this and the Freudian uncanny is that, in Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, an element of the supernatural is necessitated. Todorov argues that one of the conditions of the fantastic text is that it must “oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (Todorov 1975, p. 20). The documentary nature of Jennings’s films precludes any supernatural explanation for the events depicted, exploring instead the aesthetics of anxiety, which is one of the key areas that Freud explores in his essay on the uncanny. Jennings’s approach to the uncanny experience of war is very different to that in a film such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell & Pressburger, 1946). Powell and Pressburger’s film is a work in which we can see the fantastic at the heart of the narrative, as both the viewer and the film’s protagonists hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the film’s events. Freud explores how the uncanny arises in works of fiction that are delivered as an objective, documentary narrative such as a journal or first-person narration. The realism of these objectively reported events is then fractured by a sudden fantastic occurrence. *The Silent Village* is the clearest example of Jennings’s engagement with the uncanny as the imagined occupation of a Welsh mining village obliges

the viewer to consider the very real possibility of the fictional events depicted. Before directing *The Silent Village* Jennings produced another film that touches on the uncanny through its exploration of the aesthetics of anxiety.

#### Fires Were Started (1943)<sup>6</sup>

At eighty minutes running time, *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943) is the closest that Jennings approaches to feature length filmmaking and, in its story structure, it is also his most conventional linear narrative. The film depicts a brief period in the life of the volunteer fire service that preceded the formation of the National Fire Service in 1941. Set in the winter and spring of 1940/1941, the film is played by auxiliary firemen and firewomen re-enacting their experience of the Blitz with a script written by Jennings. Jennings had written the first treatment of the film in 1941 (Jackson 1993, pp. 38 - 40) while still working on the final cut of *Listen to Britain* and the narrative dynamic of the film is outlined in this first brief draft. The first treatment outlines the idea that the film will concentrate on one fireman who is sacrificed in order that the fire can be kept under control and away from a munitions supply. Jennings writes in the treatment:

But in any case it will end with one man definitely giving his life to make sure that the curtain of water is kept up between the fire and the shell dump. (Jackson 1993, p. 40)

The later versions add details to the story but the overall narrative treatment is clearly outlined in this first draft. *Fires Were Started* parallels other films made by

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as *I Was a Fireman*

the Crown Film Unit at the time, using dramatic reconstruction to depict the events of the war. Films such as *Target for Tonight* (Watt, 1941) use documentary footage alongside scripted and reconstructed material in order to tell the story of a raid by Bomber Command on Germany. In Harry Watt, Jennings also had a model for his method of script development and construction. When working on pre-production for *Target for Tonight*, Watt lived with the RAF crew for weeks, tailoring his dialogue to fabricate a naturalistic performance. During the production of *Fires Were Started*, Jennings worked closely with the auxiliary fire crews to create a similar form of social realism. This was a working method that he repeated in the production of *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) where he lived with the villagers and mineworkers of Cwmgiedd.

*Target for Tonight* was later adapted as *The Sky's the Limit* (Cavalcanti, 1943), a feature film starring John Mills and Michael Rennie that was directed by Cavalcanti at Ealing studios. We have seen above in discussions about documentary theory by Nichols (2001) and Winston (1995) that reconstruction was a method regularly used in films of the British documentary movement and a subject of some debate. *Fires Were Started* has been described as Jennings's masterpiece. However it is possible to argue that, although it is a very effective use of the Crown Film Unit's trope of documentary reconstruction, it is in his following film *The Silent Village* that Jennings develops the technique in a way that elicits the uncanny of wartime Britain. He does this in a specific manner that is perhaps only matched by Cavalcanti in *Went the Day Well?* (1942). Before discussing *The Silent Village* in more detail, I will first explore *Fires Were Started*

and examine how the film can be read through Jennings's continued engagement with surrealism.

The opening sequence of *Fires Were Started* establishes the location and theme of the film as it shows one of the auxiliary fire service's heavy units returning to the watch room after a night's duty. Jennings shoots from the fireman's point of view as the unit drives at speed through the deserted streets of London's docklands. The driver reports in at the office and then we see a number of different characters heading to work at the fire station before being introduced to the main character, the rookie fireman Barrett. The first four and a half minutes of the film are constructed using continuity editing techniques and conventional cinematic language such as parallel action in order to introduce the key characters of the film. Although the sequence has a clear function and is cut as a conventional narrative, we can sense the influence of Jennings's earlier works in the observations of the everyday. Some aspects of the film, particularly images of the quotidian in the opening sequences, operate in the same way that Atget's photographs of Paris appealed to Man Ray and the Parisian Surrealists, they reveal the spirit of place through a documentary uncanniness where "everything has an air of taking place somewhere else, somewhere beyond." (Valentin 1927, p. 19). We see goods being loaded onto ships, the interior and exterior of a corner shop and men digging up the street. As soon as we see the shuttered and strangely named *Cat and Cucumber Dining Rooms*, the upbeat orchestral score halts. We see a man in a doorway and hear the sound of his lone flute playing a melancholy melody whose music fills the empty street. The flute's repeating melody

continues over a sequence of shots that show the firemen arriving at work and greeting each other. The musical score is by William Alwyn who wrote over seventy film scores and was a virtuoso flautist with an interest in modernist composition. Jennings describes *Listen to Britain* as his “music film” (Jackson 1993, p. 36) and as the two films were in simultaneous production for a brief time, it is no surprise that *Fires Were Started* also foregrounds the music in this and subsequent sequences. Barrett, the new recruit, is shown asking a Chinese man for directions and, as he approaches the station, the flute’s refrain reappears. Barrett is introduced to his new workmates, we hear snatches of conversation and a small group of them singing “oh sweet mystery of life I’ve found you” while in the following shot, another fireman sings *I do Like to be Beside the Seaside*. The film’s soundtrack articulates the everyday through these observational elements such as popular songs and small talk. These details are assembled into a montage sequence featuring technical inventories of machinery and organization: this is relayed through the voiceover of the telephone operators cut with images of the firemen training and preparing equipment. The importance of using popular song to communicate meaning relates to Jennings’s earlier work such as the Flanagan and Allen sequence in *Listen to Britain* discussed above.

In the next sequence, Johnny takes Barrett around to see the docks and contemplate the everyday life around the river Thames. We see a traditional Thames barge sailing around in circles then shots of heavy guns and ammunition being loaded onto a boat. A steam locomotive heads towards the camera and we see barrage balloons being inflated and raised over the river. This sequence

operates as part of the plot, it introduces Barrett to the location where the final fire-fighting sequence takes place, but it also features some of Jennings's symbolic interests in communication, steam engines and the river Thames. The shots that form this brief sequence could equally have been included in one of his earlier documentary films but in this film they are constructed as part of a developing narrative. This is followed by a brief segment that illustrates the spare time activities of the firemen: They drink beer, play darts and snooker in scenes that echo the details of *Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*. Diegetic music returns and, in the same way that the flute melody framed Barrett's arrival at the station, a piano accordion plays a traditional melody that forms part of a sound collage. As the men continue to play and prepare for the night raid to come, the scene fades to black.

The next sequence is another piece framed by music. Barrett sits at the piano and starts to play a fast, expressive classical piece. Jennings cuts to a tracking shot along the river at night and then back to the men performing a peculiar dance in front of the snooker table. The men start to get ready for the night shift, putting on their uniforms and collecting their equipment. Barrett sits at the piano and a seemingly improvised performance of the song *One Man Went to Mow* begins. This sequence is a more upbeat and lighthearted version of the piano sequence in *Spare Time* described above. This musical sequence is used to introduce the team of eight men and illustrate their individual personalities through discrete piano stylings. As the song ends a siren sounds and a note of ominous portent is added to the cheerful performance as the men look upwards. The final chorus is played,

the men are seen to be unified and the siren sounds as we fade to black. Jennings then cuts together a series of images of the night: a dark silhouette of a ship, heavy artillery against the night sky and the clouds over the river. On the soundtrack, the siren continues and then we hear a voice read Walter Raleigh's lines:

O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, Hic jacet.

An edit reveals that one of the crew is reading these lines sitting on a bench in the station. When he finishes these lines, we hear the sound of a shell exploding in the distance and then the commanding officer debunks the portentous mood by saying "right-ho colonel, we'll set that to music - when we come back." In this first third of the film we can see Jennings applying almost the full range of techniques that he developed in his earlier films to a scripted drama. There are elements of the surrealism of the blitz, a focus on the everyday, symbolic use of narrated poetry, concerns with communication technology and most strikingly the use of music to create mood and atmosphere. All of these elements form Jennings's auteur signature but how they relate to his engagement with surrealism through this sequence may be less clear.



The next section of the film concentrates on the build-up to the final fire-fighting sequence. A further use of audio collage is a feature of this sequence: the firemen stand around the piano singing “Please Don’t Talk About Me When I’m Gone” as the fires are reported, bells are rung and the men dwindle down to one last team waiting to be assigned a duty for the evening. They stop singing when a bomb drops, knocking a picture from the wall and then continue singing with renewed vigour in defiance of the falling shells before being finally assigned to a fire. There is clearly a symbolic use of popular song in the inclusion of this and other texts that speak of regret, where personal trauma is encoded through the negative pleasure of melancholy. The nature of the film’s story is such that all of the songs and poems quoted are imbued with a sense of mournful ambiguity.

They board the fire engine and head to the fire as Johnny starts singing “I’m out with me barrow on the streets all day”. The bell rings on the fire engine and we see close-ups of the men, all sitting silently and fiddling nervously with their helmets, nothing is said and the meaning is elsewhere: in the fear of death and danger expressed through the layering of sound and image in the previous sequences. The crew arrives at the warehouse fire and the firemen set up their equipment on the dark streets. They climb up to the top of the burning building and the sense of realism is heightened by the use of smoke and fire coupled with the focus on the quotidian procedural concerns of the fire service at work. There follows a dramatic sequence of the firemen rising up through the building in an attempt to establish a curtain of water in order to keep the fire away from the ship

carrying armaments that was seen earlier in the film. This is cut with the parallel action at the auxiliary fire service communications centre. At ground level, Barrett is sent to find a source of water, a startled horse rushes past him before he finds the sunken barge seen earlier. The whole sequence is shot in low-key lighting and dominated by darkness, smoke and fire. The city is a vacant, derelict space inhabited by primal forces. The enemy is not imagined as the Germans dropping the incendiary bombs from the air but rather the primal fire which lights up the darkness. The pumps and pipes strewn across the war-torn streets resemble Max Ernst's painting *Celebes* (1921) in their peculiar entwined, curling forms that combine with the dials and hard outlines of pump units. Barrett rises up through the burning building to give a message to his colleagues on the roof. Like Ernst's interiors and Aragon's arcades, the building becomes a spatial analogue of the unconscious as Barrett climbs up through a burning world. The noise of war builds and hammers through the soundtrack, there is no longer any music or songs just the concrete percussion of bombs, machinery and burning buildings. Barrett escapes from the roof by climbing down a ladder leaving Jacko on the roof.

Jacko is the character who is sacrificed in the narrative and his death is symbolized first by a close-up shot of a rope slipping through his fingers and then a flailing hosepipe tumbling from a building. After Jacko's death, the musical score re-emerges triumphantly as the sounds of war fade and the men continue to keep the raging fire at bay until it is finally announced that the fire appears to be under control. The men emerge slowly from the desolate smoky landscapes of burning buildings and look up to the heavens as the all-clear sounds and day

returns. There is a low-angle shot of a street at dawn, hosepipes snake along the deserted road, vanishing into the distance across the flooded cobbles. We see collapsed walls, smoke drifting through the gaps where buildings once stood, obscuring the distant piles of rubble that stand like a surrealist landscape: a ruined grattage city by Max Ernst or a deserted de Chirico cityscape. A mobile canteen drives over the burning tarmac, around the piles of rubble and sets up shop next to blackened, shattered windows. The young girl serving tea is addressed with the line “Bless you, my beautiful”. This post-inferno sequence conflates beauty and the sublime in a manner that subverts the awe-inspiring sublimity of war. Domesticity trundles into the battlefield in a way that draws attention to the politics of the everyday. In dealing with the feminine and the everyday in this manner, Jennings is attempting a radical transformation of the sublime, figuring war through the subversive beauty of the feminine quotidian.

The men from Barrett’s team begin to pack up their equipment as we hear a melancholy non-diegetic orchestral score. We see them dragging their hosepipes from the piles of rubble and then Barrett finds Jacko’s helmet under a pile of bricks. In the final sequence before the film’s coda, we see a Mass-Observation-style montage of people going about their everyday business in the heart of the derelict neighbourhood destroyed by fire. A woman pushing a pram, a man carrying a package and a one legged man on crutches all move in front of Jennings’s camera, a distant observation of normal life that depicts the surrealism of the ruins. The surrealist interest in ruins is evidenced in Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926/1994) where his exploration of the *passages* of Paris is haunted by

the melancholy of their impending demolition. Foster identifies the dialectic of the surrealists' vision of history as reading through "ruination, recovery and resistance" (Foster 1993, p. 166). In the closing scenes of *Fires Were Started* the world, concretised in depictions of interior and exterior locations, is literally convulsed: burnt, twisted and ruined. We see this in Aragon's demolished *passages* and also in Keiller's more recent cinematic vision of *London* (1994) where the depicted ruination implies a recovery and resistance. Jennings makes this recovery explicit in the closing scene of *Fires Were Started*.

In the film's coda we see the barren yard of the fire station, a tree bearing blossom and then a woman pouring tea for the men while one of the team reads from Macbeth "Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men..." We see Jacko's empty bed and another man calls out "Come on chums, snap out of it!". The final sequence crosscuts between Jacko's funeral and the ship that they had saved from fire sailing out to sea with its cargo of armaments for the war effort.

The film has elements of the uncanny present, in the way that it explores the aesthetics of anxiety and the transient nature of human corporeality via the use of song lyrics and poetry. *Fires Were Started* travels from light to darkness, as daytime routine gives way to the dangers of the nightly raids. The film also has a sacrificial nature that is evident in Jennings's first treatment of the film, whose first sentence reads:

The film might begin with a fireman feeding some rabbits, and talking to the rabbits and he would be the man who was going to get killed in the film. (Jennings 1942, p. 38)

Although there may be elements of the uncanny evident in *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943), it is Jennings's next film that fully articulates the relationship between Jennings, surrealism and the uncanny.

*The Silent Village* (1943): Surrealism and the Uncanny

*The Silent Village* was made soon after *Fires Were Started*. It tells the story of the destruction of the village of Lidice in the Czech republic, transposing this event onto a British village. In 1942 the Nazi occupiers leveled Lidice to the ground in an attempt to obliterate the community as a punishment for violating the laws of their occupying force. The initial idea for the film appeared just one month after the event, in a synopsis written by Viktor Fischl; a Czech poet who was also a member of the Czechoslovak government in exile. His typed note outlines an idea for a film comparing the village of Lidice with an unspecified similar village in Wales. Jennings takes up this project in July 1942 and develops it in a way that allows for an interpretation through surrealism. If we firstly reflect on the film in relation to the three paradoxes outlined in chapter two above, we can consider that it deals with them as follows: *The Silent Village* is placeless and timeless in that it takes the contemporary historical atrocity and positions it as an eternal, legendary tale. The Nazis' very act of destroying the physical place and their attempt to eradicate the name of Lidice constructs the event as an act that is timeless and placeless. Lidice functions as a sign for the sublime politics of terror, for Nazism. The destruction of an entire village parallels the Holocaust: "In terms of the sublime, the pain of the Holocaust is such that it exceeds our ability to supply a concept." (Shaw 2006, p. 128). The silence that surrounds the Holocaust is figured through the Silent Village of the film's title and the timeless nature of the story is outlined in the film's subtitle: "The story of the men of Lidice who lit in fascist darkness a lamp that shall never be put out".

The second paradox (surrealism's existence as an international movement with distinct national identities) is played out in Jennings's staging of the film. The international anti-fascist movement of which surrealism is but one branch in the 1930s and 40s (as seen in the FIARI statement discussed above) is embodied in the tale of Lidice's determination to resist fascism. Rather than tell the tale of a specifically Czech response to fascism, Jennings stages the film in a particular Welsh cultural environment. In developing the story as an internationally relevant tale with a distinct national identity, Jennings explains how he desired to find "a village in Wales which was predestined to play the part of Lidice" (Jennings 1943, p. 67). He explains how he wanted the village to be "an actual village" (ibid.) and how he wanted to reflect the distinct national identity of Wales "We considered that it might be an important picture from the point of view of Wales as a country and also obviously from the point of view of the miners." (Jennings 1943, p. 68). In Jennings's hands, the film becomes a work about the general international struggle against Fascism but also a particular tale about a real Welsh village. In his radio talk about the making of the film, Jennings describes "international solidarity" as "one of the basic things in the picture" (Jennings 1943, p. 69).

The third paradox relates to ways in which surrealism balances an emphasis on the importance of the individual with the abdication of the individual via automatism, games and the environment of the surrealist group. In Jennings's film, his directorial vision is realized through a collaborative project: from the offset, Jennings wanted the people of his selected Welsh village to assist in the development of the script: "when we had found a village, and we could talk to

them and got their ideas on it, then we could start writing the script, but not do it the other way round.” (Jennings 1943, pp. 67 - 68). He also took advice from others regarding the area and village that should be used to stand for Lidice. Arthur Horner, President of the South Wales Miners’ Federation, suggested that Jennings visit D.D. Evans, the miner’s agent in the village of Ystradglynlais. Jennings describes how the people of Ystradglynlais immediately formed a Provisional Film Committee who worked closely with him to develop a script and film that attempted a representation of the reality of both Wales and Lidice. We can see that *The Silent Village* is a film that closely and consciously engages with all three paradoxes but it is also a film through which Jennings develops some of the other themes and concepts that thread through his previous work. *The Silent Village* takes on the notion of the everyday, building small gestures and everyday environments into moments of symbolic significance. Unlike his earlier films, these moments of the everyday also have significance within a more discreet and scripted narrative. The driving concept of Jennings’s *Pandæmonium* (1985) project (his investigation into the effects of the coming of the machine age on the human psyche) are also at the heart of *The Silent Village*. This is evident in the way that Jennings describes the mechanism of the film as being the clash of two cultures: “The ancient, Welsh, liberty-loving culture... and this new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture invented by Dr Goebbels and his satellites.” (Jennings 1943, p. 75).

The film opens with a brief series of titles dedicating the film to the people of Lidice and outlining the collaborative nature of the work. The titles are shown over



a rapidly running stream and accompanied by a brief orchestral overture that includes a harp followed by a trumpet call. As the music fades, Jennings constructs an introductory sequence that demonstrates the subtle use of sound and image developed through his earlier work. The audio collage of this sequence blends the sound of running water with birdsong and the congregation singing in the village's chapel. In three stepped cuts we move to the interior of the chapel where we see the people of Cwmgiedd singing. The sound and image of the chapel dissolves into the sound and image of the village's coal mine, a coal truck rises from the mine with a sharp metallic sound and we see the stern-faced miners going about their business above ground. The scene shifts via an aerial view of the village to the sound and image of the village's school where children are being taught in Welsh. The next shots illustrate the everyday work of women in the village: polishing brass, washing laundry and breaking coal for the fire. We see allotments being dug and the interior of the village store before returning to the miners as they come off shift. The miners shower and chat while they wash each other and on the soundtrack we hear the off-screen sound of a male tenor singing in Welsh. Jennings cuts back to the schoolroom and then to a view over the landscape. A choir sing *Men of Harlech* on the soundtrack as we see the men walking home from the mine into the village where the home life and work life are unified in a series of domestic vignettes (a man being washed by his children, a family sitting down to tea, an audience watching Donald Duck at the cinema, men in the pub). This sequence culminates in a meeting of the Miners' union committee where they address each other as "comrades". Another piece sung by a male voice choir appears as we see the evening in the village: The streets are now

empty and we move into a series of parlours. In the first parlour an elderly couple are sitting, the lady is darning and the man is reading, in the second parlour a young woman is having her wedding dress fitted and in the third house we see a young family. The first eight minutes of the film is constructed as a naturalistic observational sequence with no dialogue. Jennings's use of collaborative, Mass-Observation-style work in making the film is evident in these intimate scenes from everyday life. The opening section of the film ends with an intertitle that reads: "Such is life at Cwmgiedd in the western valleys of Wales – and such too was life in Lidice until the coming of Fascism."

In the opening eight minutes of the film Jennings uses the full range of techniques and devices that he has developed through his previous film work. The film is not about a war with Germany but rather a war against Fascism. In effect the opening sequence illustrates Jennings's idea of a village that epitomises the "Welsh liberty-loving culture" (Jennings 1943, p. 75).

The next sequence introduces the "new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture" (Jennings 1943, p. 75) of the Nazis. First we see and hear the river. No longer a gentle stream, it is now a loud rushing torrent. Jennings cuts back to a wide shot of the bridge over the river and a large car with an outsized loudhailer fixed to the roof appears. Martial music is blaring from the speaker as the car invades the town's peace and a faceless official announces that Wales is now under the protection of the greater German Reich. The people of the village are told to continue calmly with their work and put their trust in the Fuhrer. We see similar

shots of the people of Cwmgiedd going about their everyday life to those in the opening sequences, but now the context has changed, the familiar has become unfamiliar. Jennings is using the juxtaposition of sound and image to develop an uncanniness, allowing “the familiar (to) become uncanny and frightening” (Freud 1919, p. 124). The loudhailer is shown in close-up, filling the entire screen as the faceless voice describes the possible punishments for disobedience. The subsequent sequence includes the first obviously scripted element of dialogue, taking place in the office of Mr. Lewis, the mine manager. The room is filled with the noise of machinery, the walls are rough plastered and large iron keys hang over the cluttered, blackened mantelpiece. Mr. Lewis shows a letter to the union representative, it contains orders from the occupying force that states: “the miners’ lodges and other similar organisations are, in fact, no longer necessary in a National Socialist state”. The film cuts to an external sequence where blackened miners are grouped together listening to a speech from their representative. He stands, his face and clothes soiled with coal dust and recommends that they take strike action. The men vote in favour and the union representative says “thank you comrades”. As part of a fiction, this action seems empowering and reasonable in the face of and as resistance to the Nazi occupation but there are few images of British working men as socialists or “comrades” in the oeuvre of the British documentary school. Despite the fact that many films made by the Crown Film Unit feature working men and occasionally a union’s interaction with industrial managers, it is seldom that working men are shown as needing to take industrial action. This element of the documentary movement’s pusillanimity is described by Winston when he writes that “running away from social meaning is what the

Griersonian documentary, and therefore the entire tradition, does best.” (Winston 1995, p. 37).

The men have taken strike action and we are shown a series of shots of the streets and interiors of Cwmgiedd. Men are sitting on the street in silent, idle resistance to the occupying force. A mournful violin plays, a dog barks and the faceless loudhailer floats into shot, filling the screen as a German voice calls out “*Achtung! Achtung!*” and warns that, despite the magnanimity of the occupying force, there are individuals who are disturbing the “labour peace”. The invading force is depicted as an invisible, mechanical loudhailer dispensing propaganda. We then see the men and women of Cwmgiedd organizing resistance in the everyday spaces of rural life, four men gather in a barn as the loudhailer continues to outline how enemies of the state will be persecuted. When taken in isolation, the images that we are shown are innocuous, observational shots of men sitting on the street or in a barn, women holding babies or carrying cups of tea. The soundtrack with its emotionless series of factual statements ending with the statement “those who go against the Reich will be destroyed” changes the film’s everyday imagery to something more uncanny. Freud explores the roots of the uncanny as “starting from the homely and domestic” - he develops this point with the notion that - “there is a further development towards the notion of something removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret” (Freud 1919, p. 134). This is played out in the villagers’ retreat into secrecy. The invasion necessitates a divide between the domestic and the occupied public sphere and what was once familiar (the landscape, the village) becomes unfamiliar.

The next sequence illustrates the Nazis carrying out their destructive threat. We hear gunshots in the distance and the people of the village look up at the sky, aware of a secret that is hidden from our eyes. Jennings's use of juxtaposition comes to the fore here; we see trees blowing in the wind and hear the sound of machine gun fire crackling. Men are shown running through the shady glades around Cwmgiedd while others in the village stand in their gardens looking upwards. The meaning is elsewhere, in the juxtaposition of sound and image. The fear and tension is emphasized, the uncanny emotions of life under occupation are imagined through this act of combination.

The gunshots on the soundtrack inform us that the Nazis are carrying out their threat to kill the resistance members. The drama of the execution of the resistance members is then shown through four silent close-ups: A man lies dead, blood trickling from his ear, a startled cow's head, its eye in close-up, a milking stool rolling on the floor and a woman's face, blood trickling from her mouth. Four men carry the body of a badly injured man on a makeshift stretcher as crows call in the wood beyond. We then have a few brief interior sequences where Welsh is the only language spoken. The injured man is shown to have died and we return to the chapel where the congregation is singing in a repeat of the opening sequence of the film. This is followed by a shot of a rustling tree and the sound of the wind howling, the sequence fades to black. It is interesting that Jennings uses the Welsh language at this point in the drama; in his radio broadcast, he describes how he saw the Welsh language as signifying the indigenous culture of the region and the

individualism that Fascism attempts to destroy (Jennings 1943, p. 73). This is emphasized in the next sequence where the teacher tells her pupils that they have been ordered to stop using the Welsh language in school. She entreats the pupils to use their Welsh language outside of school as an act of solidarity and defiance. This idea is reinforced later in the film by the production of an underground newsletter written in Welsh.

The sound of a harp acts as an audio bridge, connecting the idea of Welsh culture to the Welsh landscape and the new headquarters of the resistance, based in a castle high on a rocky crag overlooking the village. At this point, halfway through the film, Jennings introduces a voiceover for the first and only time. The voice says: “What is to be done? Go back to the mine, work slow, organize sabotage, put sand in the machine, pour water in the oil.” The sequence of juxtapositions such as water and oil symbolise direct action; resistance against the Nazi force who are described in the dialogue as having “descended... in a molesting spirit like a plague of locusts”. The male voice choir is heard again, singing *Men of Harlech* while the men of the village are shown plotting and planning sabotage. Snow settles on the ground, everyday scenes of work and domesticity are cut against scenes of sabotage that culminate in the assassination of faceless German guards and an explosion at the mines. After the explosion, Jennings cuts to a classroom where the teacher is explaining how the conquest of Wales was a very slow process. The drama is developed over the next few shots by using the sound of a radio broadcast. In an effective exploitation of a simple device, Jennings uses the first significant tracking shot in the film to track towards the valve radio in a

smooth, tightly composed shot that emphasizes an everyday object (the radio) and adds a level of significance to this object through a further cut to another radio. Suddenly the radio becomes an extension of Dr. Goebbels's "loudspeaker, blaring culture" (Jennings 1943, p. 75), invading the domestic space. The broadcast describes in detail the bland components of a ladies bicycle yet this description becomes intimidating; the list of components is no longer the stuff of Aragon's charming little placards or Jennings's menu at the works canteen but rather an uncanny and ominous portent of disaster. Throughout the film, psychic unrest creeps in via the soundtrack: the radio, the loudspeaker and distant gunfire. This is further emphasized in the next sequence when the inhabitants of the village themselves have become elements of an inventory carried out by the occupying force. The people of the village are required to register at the local police headquarters or face execution. We see the villagers queuing up to report and state their name, age and occupation, they become items in a human inventory, a surrealist list turned uncanny in the means to which these everyday facts are being put.

The loudhailer fills the screen, barking questions that could equally be a surrealist investigation if it were not for the subject matter of the plot and narrative – the loudhailer calls out in a strong German accent "Where is there a lady's bicycle missing?" the question echoes over the village shown in long shot from a high angle, the wind whistles on the soundtrack and then we hear the question "Who knows persons who were seen without their lady's bicycles after the attempt?" The inventory is then taken to a further, darker use, as the names of those

sentenced to death are read out over the radio along with shots of darkened interiors where the people of the village sit quietly absorbing the information. The radio is depicted in ominous extreme close-up, its speaker appearing as a dark doorway from which sound emanates and yet into which we might tumble, into the list of names, inviting us to die for our approval of the Deputy Reich Protector's assassination. A drumroll accompanies the second use of a tracking shot that again tracks into a large, dark radio that sits on a chair in an empty room. The official announcement that tells of the Deputy Reich Protector's death calls for a new Europe with the Führer and a new future with the Reich. This announcement is accompanied by swelling music and is an effectively realistic broadcast, one that doesn't mock or overblow the Nazi's propaganda message, rather it is chillingly effective. The radio broadcast is accompanied by shots of a woman folding a tablecloth and a man sitting in a chair, a focus on the everyday that, like Bresson's work, converts a simple domestic moment to "something magical and divine" (Klevan 2000, p. 28). The radio is turned off as the announcer starts to list another inventory of men sentenced to death by the occupying power. The act of quietly, determinedly folding the household linen whilst listening to the chilling threat gives this everyday action a sacred dimension that speaks of the suffering of wartime.

The final appearance of the loudhailer, framed in extreme close-up, opens the next sequence. It calls angrily to the villagers, into a gloomy morning that "you have aided and abetted the circle of suspects in question". The people of the village are given a final ultimatum. The villagers are shown silently contemplating the news



and to emphasise this, the once-rushing river is now shown as mute. A clock quietly ticks as we see a brief montage of silent shots from around the village until the deadline of 12.00 noon is reached.

In the final sequence of the film Jennings allows the soundtrack to tease an emotional response from the audience. We hear the sound of jackboots marching and the voices of the men of the village singing the Welsh national anthem *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau* (Land of My Fathers). The men sing in defiance as they shuffle up towards the wall where they are being lined up for execution. The emotional effect of the song is used to heighten this most upsetting sequence of the film as the children of the village are shown in one high angle long shot being loaded quietly and submissively onto the back of a Nazi van while a German soldier stands sentinel in the playground. As the men stop singing we hear the sound of the firing squad and see a shot of the village churchyard in the evening sun. We then hear a radio broadcast in German and see the smoldering remains of the levelled village. In the final shots of the sequence we see perhaps the most visually surreal elements of the film: firstly we see a burning easel standing in front of a group of burning buildings. A caption translates the broadcast, describing the fact that all of the male adults of the village have been executed, the women and children sent to concentration camps and that the community has been obliterated. This caption is framed by a burning window through which we look out towards the river that flows through the village. The final shot tracks across a series of burning everyday objects including a sewing machine on a table (perhaps a reference to Lautréamont's "chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a

sewing-machine and an umbrella”), a photographic portrait and finally a shot of a mantelpiece, window and chair lying in the flowing river that fades to black.

A penultimate set of captions explain that this is what the Nazis did to Lidice but that it is not the end of the story. Jennings shows the village of Cwmgiedd being repopulated by children skipping back into the playground and then, in an example of documentary self-reflexivity, he shows the people of the village reading a news story about Lidice. The leader of the Miner’s union says “No comrades, the Nazis are wrong, the name of the community has not been obliterated, the name of the community has been immortalized, it lives in the hearts of miners the world over...”. In a turn of phrase that hints at the revolutionary intent of Jennings’s film, the miners say that they have “the power to liberate oppressed humanity”. Jennings returns to the surreal image of the shattered parlour lying in the river, shrouded in smoke and to shots of the miners returning to work as coal trucks ride up from underground and an elegiac sun shines through the industrial landscape on a smoky morning while, on the soundtrack, a choir sings.

As mentioned above, a number of Jennings’s films have been nominated, by a range of authors, as his masterpieces. The most often mentioned in this regard are *Listen To Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942), *Fires Were Started* (Jennings, 1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (Jennings, 1946). *The Silent Village* has recently begun to appear on this list of key films although, for many years, the film tended to be marginalized in discussions of Jennings’s oeuvre. *The Silent Village* is the

key work by Jennings that can lead to an understanding of the relationship between surrealism and British film making in the work of subsequent filmmakers. Jennings's film can be read through an understanding of the ways in which *The Silent Village* embodies a surrealist interpretation of the uncanny, particularly as outlined by Foster in *Compulsive Beauty* (Foster 1993). As a starting point, one can consider the "origin story" (Foster 1993, p. xi) of surrealism as outlined in Foster's text on surrealism and the uncanny and how this story relates to Jennings's film. Foster sees the origin of surrealism in Breton's account of his work during the First World War in a neuropsychiatric clinic. It was here that Breton tended a young shell-shocked soldier who believed that the entire war was a fake "with the wounded made up cosmetically and the dead on loan from medical schools" (Foster 1993, p. xi). Foster describes this soldier as "a figure shocked into another reality that was also somehow a critique of this reality" (Foster 1993, p. xi) and considers Breton's experience as an alternative account of the roots of surrealism, an account that explains the roots of surrealism as embedded in the uncanny. Foster opposes this to what he considers as the accepted notion that surrealism is a movement of "love and liberation" (Foster 1993, p. xi). He considers instead that Breton's story positions surrealism as a movement that speaks of "traumatic shock, deadly desire, compulsive repetition" (Foster 1993, p. xi). This origin story can also be read in the themes and concerns of Jennings's work as they coalesce in the alternate reality of *The Silent Village*. This is a film that works through, in cinematic form, not only the uncanny experience of wartime Britain but also the uncanny image of a European reality that could quite feasibly be the possible near future of Britain under the Nazis.

Foster sees the uncanny as being a concept that is both contemporary with surrealism and “immanent to its field” (Foster 1993, p. xvii), it is not the “iconography of surrealism” (Foster 1993, p. xvii) but rather something that can be extracted from a reading of surrealist works. Foster argues that the uncanny remains in the unconscious of surrealist thought, that in surrealism, the uncanny is “nowhere directly thought” (Foster, 1993, p. xviii) but rather “everywhere treated” (Foster, 1993, p. xviii) and that it is evident in “the most famous definition of surrealism” (Foster, 1993, p. xviii) i.e. in the paradoxical point where life and death, the real and the imagined and so on coexist.

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. (Breton 1930, p. 123)

Foster argues that: “the real and the imagined, the past and the future only come together in the experience of the uncanny, and its stake is death” (Foster 1993, p. xix). Of all Jennings’s films, the *Silent Village* most clearly articulates this experience of the uncanny in its contrast of the past reality of Lidice against the imagined future occupation of Cwmgiedd, in whose fictional universe the lives of the villagers are at stake.

Freud chooses E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story of 1816 *The Sand-Man* as a case study through which to explore the concept of the uncanny, particularly in its use

of the automaton as a figure that allows an exploration of the uncertainty around apparently inanimate objects that may be alive and, conversely, about living objects that may be inanimate. Foster also considers the automaton in his examination of works such as Hans Bellmer's *poupée* mannequins. I discuss below how Jennings engages with this notion in his depiction of the occupying Nazi regime in *The Silent Village* where the Nazi car can be read as an automaton and the German soldier as a faceless mannequin. For Freud the experience of the uncanny, as the frightening return of something familiar, involves the return of a phenomenon that has been repressed by the subject and, through this repression, made strange. When the subject becomes aware of the repressed image, they become anxious and the image becomes ambiguous. Foster describes this "anxious ambiguity" (Foster 1993, p. 7) as producing three "primary effects of the uncanny" (Foster 1993, p. 7) and, as a way of exploring the uncanny nature of *The Silent Village*, I will briefly describe the film in relation to these three effects.

The first effect is that of "an indistinction between the real and the imagined" (Foster 1993, p. 7), we can see this in Jennings's film where the real events of Lidice are transposed, through an act of imagination, onto the village of Cwmgiedd. The uncanny effect of this indistinction is amplified by the use of non-professional actors and the documentary treatment of the everyday activities transposed into an imagined situation that is also a recent historical event.

The second primary effect of the uncanny is "a confusion between the animate and the inanimate" (Foster 1993, p. 7). In *The Silent Village*, this effect is most

clearly evidenced in Jennings's depiction of the occupying force. The Nazi occupiers as a deadly threat are not shown as animate beings but rather they appear through technology: the voice that crackles from an oversized loudhailer attached to a car driven by shadows or the disembodied voice that barks from the domestic radio receivers. On the two or three occasions that we see German soldiers, they are shown as faceless silhouettes. There is no reasoning to be had with either the broadcast voice or the uniformed mannequin. Like the smiling German soldiers who stand joking amongst a farmyard full of corpses in the few surviving documentary photographs of the Lidice massacre (Roberts 2010, p. 10), there is an uncanny effect created by the question that surely humans could not commit these atrocities? The Nazis are depicted as alienated machine-men: man made automaton by the nature of his inhuman acts.

The third primary effect of the uncanny is "a usurpation of the referent by the sign or of physical reality by psychic reality" (Foster 1993, p. 7). In Jennings's film, this uncanny effect is evinced in the similarities between the people of Cwmgiedd and Lidice through the transposition of the historical events in one place onto another place. The effect of Jennings's speculative reconstruction is uncanny not only because of the similarities between the everyday lives of the working people of the two regions but also because of the knowledge that, in the reality of recent history, the people of Lidice have been executed and their village leveled alongside the very real threat that this too could soon happen to the people of Cwmgiedd. The uncanny effect is one of anxiety, an anxiety that may be felt by both the actors in the drama and the viewers of the film. Through these three

effects the familiar world of a small Welsh village becomes estranged. To borrow from Breton's surrealist manifesto the film explores the real and the imagined: depicting life and death, the communicable and the incommunicable, the past and a possible future.

The events depicted in *The Silent Village* can be seen as a cinematic equivalent to the shell-shocked soldier's alternate reality encountered by Breton in 1916 and also by Freud in his work with war veterans. Foster writes that the dreams and neuroses of these soldiers were seen by Freud as "belated attempts to 'prepare' the subject to master the shock of the event" (Foster 1993, p. 10). Jennings's film can be seen as an attempt to mobilize this process of "protective anxiety" (Foster 1993, p. 10) at a national level: to defend against a possible national crisis and prepare the country for the psychic effect of an occupying force. Freud's research into the repeating dreams of traumatized soldiers led him to postulate his theory of the death drive, a complex and contradictory theory that Foster suggests may parallel surrealist paradoxes (Foster 1993, p. 11). It is possible to see, in the nostalgia that accompanies Jennings's work in the present day, a form of death drive, a desire to return to an earlier state, nostalgia that falls back upon itself on a Möbius strip of re-experienced trauma.

Foster asserts that the marvelous superseded automatism as the "basic principal of Bretonian surrealism" (Foster 1993, p. 19) and that this was fully realized in Breton's published works by the time that Jennings had begun to develop his mature style of filmmaking. It is therefore apposite to ask how *The Silent Village*

articulates the uncanny through an engagement with the marvelous? Foster asserts that the surrealist marvelous is “implicitly pledged (to) the reenchantment of a disenchanted world” (Foster 1993, p. 19) and that the focus of a surrealist manifestation of the marvelous would be an attempt to counter “a capitalist society made ruthlessly rational” (ibid). The *Silent Village* takes the mechanized “new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture” (Jennings 1943, p. 75) of the Nazis as the apogee of ruthless social rationality and counters it with the “liberty-loving culture” (Jennings 1943, p. 75) of the Welsh people. The Nazi occupation is marvelous in that it causes a “rupture in the natural order” (Foster 1993, p. 19), a secular occupation that is subverted by the resistance activities of the villagers. Their activities are not in the service of a revolutionary new society but rather act towards the conservation of an existing society, one that Jennings depicts as transcendent in its timelessness. This notion links back to the paradoxes of British surrealism discussed above, particularly the timeless nature of events set in a specific time. This marvelous, revolutionary / everyday, conservative paradox is one that is played out in subsequent films by directors such as those of Patrick Keiller and Gideon Köppel mentioned in the conclusion of this thesis. Foster describes the marvelous as *being* the uncanny “but projected, at least in part, away from the unconscious and repressed material toward the world and future revelation” (Foster 1993, p. 20). Foster asserts that the surrealists exploit the uncanny effect caused by the return of repressed material but that they resist the implications of the notion that the death drive is the psychic logic that drives this effect. *The Silent Village* can be read through this surrealist exploitation of the uncanny in that it projects into the real life of Cwmgiedd village a repetition of



traumatic events from contemporaneous history. The death drive is evident in the villagers' compulsion to return to and re-perform the events of Lidice. It is also evident in their desire to return to an earlier state: to resist ruthless rationality in order to conserve an earlier way of life. The film resists these consequences and therefore the consequences of the death drive in its coda when the children are shown to be still living and to be the living embodiment of the people of Lidice. This can be seen to operate in a different way to *Fires Were Started*, where death is the result of the film's narrative and, as mentioned above, a redemptive sacrifice was the film's theme from its conception.

The uncanny can work in different registers, that of the historical as well as the psychic. Foster contends that surrealism's engagement with the uncanny not only operates on a personal level through the recovery of repressed individual traumatic experience but also that it concerns "the shocks of industrial capitalism" (Foster 1993, p. 125) and "the recovery of obsolete cultural materials" (Foster 1993, p. 125). In discussing this notion, Foster foregrounds the historical dimension of the uncanny in relation to surrealism. As mentioned above, the effect of industrial capitalism on the human imagination is a concern that Jennings regularly returns to and is the focus of his literary collage magnum opus, *Pandæmonium* (1985). For the Dadaists, the "shocks of industrial capitalism" (Foster 1993, p. 125) reached an extreme in the carnage of World War One, for Jennings the experience of World War Two and the threat of Nazi invasion embodied this same shock. The second aspect of this theme can also be read in *The Silent Village*, a work whose narrative positions "the recovery of obsolete

cultural materials” as a radical action placed in opposition to what Foster describes as “the deathliness of the fascist subject” (Foster 1993, p. 125). In Jennings’s film, the village as an independent, freethinking cultural entity is obsolete in terms of industrial capitalism. It is also obsolete from the perspective of the fascist occupying force that argues, in the logical manner of fascist cause and effect, that those who “disturb public order, security and the labour peace” will be executed. In Jennings’s film, the village asserts itself in opposition to fascism and concretizes the return of a repressed social form. The opening scenes show the village’s traditional life as a world that existed before, what the film’s intertitle describes as, “the coming of Fascism” and it is this pre-fascist life that the villagers lay down their lives to defend.

As if to emphasise the village’s position as an outmoded social form, its resistance movement makes its base in a hilltop ruined castle. Breton describes the marvelous as inhabiting the romantic ruins of the castle (Breton 1924, p. 16) and Foster reads Breton’s image of a castle as evoking “the displacing of cultural forms” by the “regime of machine production and commodity consumption” (Foster 1993, p. 126). We can read Jennings’s depiction of the castle as linked to these ideas, where the machine regime is epitomized by Goebbels’s “new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture” (Jennings 1943, p. 75) and where the castle symbolises the “liberty-loving culture of Wales” (Jennings 1943, p. 75). Cwmgiedd’s position as symbolic of resistance and independence is made clearer if we read the lines struck out of Jennings’s radio speech on the film. His speech on the BBC Home Service was made on 26 May 1943 and describes the processes

of planning and production for *The Silent Village*. The broadcast was censored and the lines removed from the script are ones that make a direct link between the village and radical pacifism:

In the last war, Cwmgiedd was called the neutral country' So I said 'Why?' and he said, 'Because there was not a man who volunteered. They were all Pacifist.' I said, 'How did that occur?' 'Well, you see, there was man down there who had great power with the villagers and he was a reader of Tolstoy and Tolstoy was a pacifist.' (Jennings 1943, p. 71)

Jennings's radio speech also describes how the people of Cwmgiedd had defended the rights of the local gypsy minority and had "made the mountains and the woods above the valley, free for everybody" (Jennings 1943, p. 71). In his selection of a location that typifies the ancient village as a seat of freedom and independence and in his casting of the same village as leading the fight against Nazi invasion, Jennings is uncovering "the revolutionary energies apparent in the antiquated" (Benjamin 1929, p. 148). He is also, in Foster's terms, attempting to "redeem the outmoded" in order to "mock the mechanical-commodified." (Foster 1993, p. 126). In Jennings's film, the Nazi occupation can be read as the mechanical-commodified incarnate: their attempts to mechanise the body are mocked by Jennings and their attempt to commodify the population are resisted by the villagers. Firstly Jennings mocks the voice of the Nazi party through its issue via the uncanny mechanical and faceless loudhailer. Secondly Jennings depicts the Nazi soldiers as machine men: faceless, silhouetted soldiers who appear as soulless mannequins. Alongside the "romantic *ruins*" (Breton 1924, p. 16), Breton evokes the "modern *mannequin*" (Breton 1924, p. 16) as a further symbol of the

marvelous. Foster sees surrealist uses of the symbolism of the mannequin as evoking “an uncanny confusion between life and death” (Foster 1993, p. 126), arguing that the remaking of the body as mannequin evokes the remaking of the body as commodity. Not only do we have the Nazis depicted as automaton, carrying out evil with no apparent remorse, we also have a depiction of their attempts to commodify the villagers. This attempt to turn the body into commodity is illustrated by the sequence in which the villagers queue up to register with the occupying government, becoming an inventory of commodified humanity. In *The Silent Village*, the Nazis are attempting to enforce a mechanized social order, entreating the residents of Cwmgiedd to become compliant automatons.

Foster describes how Benjamin argues that social and psychic behavior had become mechanized by industrialization, how by 1939 “even the simplest of acts (lighting a match, making a telephone call, taking a photograph) were automatic” (Foster 1993, p. 149). Jennings’s villagers take up the surrealist cudgel against the impingement of the human psyche. They fight against the attempts to commodify and pacify them and also against the prohibition (of language, culture and political activity) that violates the desires of the people. Returning to Foster’s introduction and to the alternative “origin story” of surrealism, rooted in the incarnation of the shell-shocked soldier, we can see these figures operating in Jennings’s film in opposition to the fascist cult of the machine. The bodies of the executed civilian resistance fighter, the industrial worker and the villager are pitted against the weapon/man/machine that is the fascist soldier. In Foster’s terms, these surrealist

figures are used by Jennings to “contest the modern cult of the machine” (Foster 1993, p. 136).

In an attempt to reveal the uncanny nature of *The Silent Village*, we should explore the work briefly in relation to Freud’s conception of the death drive. This is the term devised by Freud to explain the bodily instinct to return to the state of non-existence that preceded our birth. Freud also uses the death drive, in contradiction to the pleasure principle, to explain the way in which subjects are prone to repeat traumatic events as an instinctive response. He asserts that “in the unconscious mind we can recognize the dominance of a *compulsion to repeat*” and that this compulsion is “strong enough to override the pleasure principle” (Freud 1919, p. 145). Although the death drive is not named explicitly in *The Uncanny*, rather it “lurks as if forbidden to speak its name, everywhere in the 1919 essay” (Royle 2003, p. 86). Freud discusses the way in which there is a close relationship between the uncanny and death; that “To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” (Freud 1919, p. 148). In the light of this close connection between the compulsion to repeat, the death drive and the uncanny, it should be noted that the *The Silent Village* itself is a *döppelgänger*: a cinematic doubling of events. The historical events of Lidice are replayed in Cwmgiedd and the two locations are uncannily alike. Jennings’s treatment of the historical events as speculative fiction is an uncanny in its effect, building on Cavalcanti’s *Went the Day Well* (1942). The technique is replayed in subsequent films, most notably in Brownlow’s *It Happened Here* (1965).

The truly uncanny effect of *The Silent Village* is the manner in which it repeats and reenacts a traumatic event. The notion of reenacting death amplifies Barthes's explorations of the relationships between photography and death. Where Barthes explores photography as the "way in which our time assumes Death" (Barthes 1984, p. 92), examining photography as the "anthropological place of Death" (Barthes 1984, p. 92) in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Jennings develops these notions through his film, firstly attempting to bear witness to an atrocity by reenacting it and secondly by recording what may be the final traces of a life that is about to disappear. In watching the film, we engage with the events of Lidice as the "*studium*" (Barthes 1984, p. 26): the ethical and political field of interest represented by the story of the atrocity. We are then pricked by a series of questions about the cinematic artifact, questions that directly parallel the *punctums* that Barthes assigns to the portrait of Lewis Payne reproduced in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1984, p. 95). We watch the film with the dual knowledge that "*This will be and this has been*" (Barthes 1984, p. 96). In the same way that Barthes was pricked by the photograph of his mother as a child, we "shudder... *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*" (Barthes, 1984, p. 96). We are also pricked by the details of life in the village of Cwmgiedd, by the depiction of the everyday interiors, faces and clothes; they supply us "with a collection of partial objects" (Barthes 1984, p. 30) that seem to require us to study them in order to draw knowledge from them. The images of Cwmgiedd operate in the same way that the photographs of Paris in Breton's *Nadja* operate: they become a "space whose enigmatic character is revealed little by little, by our honing in on it,

rather than delving behind it” (Sheringham 2006, p. 94). In Jennings’s act of using the everyday life of Cwmgiedd to function as reenactment-as-witness, not only are we confronted by the depiction of a horrific event that has already occurred, we are also pricked by the notion of a range of possibilities: that this type of horror has been, may have been, is being and will be replayed in times and places distant from the original trauma.

Bretonian surrealism is a “signal” (*Angstsignal*), a repetition of a reaction to a past trauma triggered by a perception of a present danger. (Foster 1993, p. 31)

*The Silent Village* is such an *angstsignal*, operating on a national level. It is a repetition of and reaction to the traumatic events of Lidice and is triggered by the perception of a present danger in the form of a Nazi invasion. Although the film is designed as a memorial to the recent events, opening up the trauma to public view, there is also an element of repression in the way that the story of Lidice is subsumed into the story of Cwmgiedd. Foster describes the enigmatic, uncanny effect of this process as attesting “not to a lack of signification to be filled in the future but to an overdetermination produced in the past.” (Foster 1993, p. 31). The uncanny drama has become historically realized in the notion that there is a dark force abroad and this dark force is imaged through the figure of the deadly automaton: the Nazi silhouette, the faceless loudhailer and radio broadcasts. For the urban population of wartime Britain, the deadly automaton also surfaced in the experience of the pilotless V1 and V2 rockets that were targeted at London from 1942 onwards. The traumatic anxiety of the film resides not only in the depiction

of the historical event but also in the dialectic between the two locations. The film operates as a “Cinderella ashtray” (Foster 1993, p. 45) in the way that it conflates a figure of desire (the village and the motherland as symbolic of freedom) with a figure of death (the extinction of the village and all that it symbolizes). The act of using trauma to inform art is one that defines much surrealist work, Foster describes it thus:

Indeed, all these surrealist practices might be seen as so many attempts, compulsively repeated, to master trauma, to transform the anxious into the aesthetic, the uncanny into the marvelous. (Foster 1993, p. 48)

Foster identifies that Breton attempts to “articulate (the) basis of surrealist art” (Foster 1993, p. 59) through the metaphorical image of “a man cut in two by a window” (Breton 1924, p. 21). This figure can be applied to *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) in that the film is the reflection of another place, a world cut in two. The dualistic worlds are figured both in the physical locations of Lidice/Cwmgiedd and also in the worldviews of the liberty-loving Welsh as opposed to Goebbels’s Nazi propaganda. The notion that develops from Breton’s image; of mankind cut in two by a window; appears symbolically in the closing sequence of the film where it is figured by the view of a fast-flowing river seen through a burning window frame, the burning window of the school and a smashed window lying in the stream. This sequence of burning and smashed windows separates the two domains of death (the destruction of the village) and desire (the repopulation of the village).



Foster argues that “various oeuvres in surrealism recapitulate different moments of trauma” (Foster 1993, p. 195), for the artists that Foster is concerned with (Breton, de Chirico, Ernst, Giacometti, Bellmer) these traumatic moments tend to be personal, psychic traumas such as the awakening of sexuality in the individual. Jennings’s moment of trauma is the horror of war, the alternative origin myth of surrealism as suggested by Foster (1993). *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) is the most visceral and affective of Jennings’s films in the way that the characters and the audience are “taken by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols” (Breton 1937/1988). Remy describes Jennings’s *Pandæmonium* (1985) as “a strictly chronological arrangement of texts whose purpose is to transcend any kind of chronology and reach to the ‘other side’ of man-made machines, the dark territories they come from.” (Remy 2012, p. 1). Although the purpose of *The Silent Village* (Jennings, 1943) may appear to be a relatively straightforward act of remembrance and solidarity, its ultimate goal is similar to that of *Pandæmonium* (1985) in the way that it examines the “dark territories” (Remy 2012, p. 1) of war. The film brings Jennings’s *Pandæmonium* (1985) into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the modernist, capitalist machine is figured in the uncanny forest of modern warfare.

### Humphrey Jennings’s Final Films

Following *The Silent Village* (1943), Jennings completed eight further films<sup>7</sup> and was in production of a ninth at the time of his death. Although I do not intend to

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<sup>7</sup> I am counting Jennings’s films *The 80 Days* (1944) and *VI* (1944) as one film as they were constructed with the same material for two different markets and using different commentaries.

focus on these films in great depth, I will briefly discuss them in relation to the ideas raised above before concluding the thesis with suggestions of possible areas for further investigation. The first of these final eight films, *The True Story of Lili Marlene* (Jennings, 1944), develops strategies from *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *The Silent Village* (1943), in that it purports to tell a true story with elements of reconstruction and re-enactment. These strategies are announced in the opening titles of the film that read:

we have had the devoted collaboration of a great number of people particularly Eighth Army men, London dockworkers, radio experts and refugees from Fascism. Some have brought us information, others re-enacted scenes from the past, others again appear in the picture as themselves.

The film is more light-hearted than his two earlier works and in this optimistic levity there is a sense that the war is drawing to a conclusion. There is a playfulness in the way that the film combines a desire to express authenticity with an obvious theatricality. The film asserts the truthfulness of its story and yet it also admits to the mythical, fictional nature of the tale. In the introductory opening sequence Marius Goring describes the story of *Lili Marlene* as “a sort of modern fairy story really, only it’s a true story as well” and the film is an unusual combination of asserted veracity and mythical, propagandist reconstruction. Marius Goring was a school friend, attending the Perse School in Cambridge at the same time as Jennings, although they were in different year groups. Goring is perhaps best known for his roles in Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *The Red Shoes* (1948). The brief opening sequence of the film

has something of the atmosphere of *A Matter of Life and Death* in the use of a harp on the soundtrack and the image on the wall behind Goring which depicts a map of Europe that appears to be dissolving into clouds. The film parallels Powell and Pressburger's work in the dreamlike staging of the story. The next shot is a tracking shot along a series of trophies and souvenirs that a soldier has brought home from the front line. These trophies include a 78rpm record that has been nailed to the wall. This record becomes a surrealist *objet trouvé* with a significance that is played out in the film that follows – it is an object that contains a story and an uncanny history. As the record plays on the soundtrack, Jennings slowly tracks into the inanimate object nailed to the wall above the mantelpiece, floating above a ration book and other objects of the everyday. The shot is similar to the ones that Jennings uses in *The Silent Village* when he tracks into the radio but this time the German voice is singing rather than barking orders and the soundtrack does not appear as ominous. There is still an uncanny significance to this plaintive alien voice singing in the domestic space of an English wartime living room. The film's voiceover takes us to Hamburg in 1923 where we see a poet writing the lyrics of *Lili Marlene* in an attic room. The scene is a dreamlike theatrical reconstruction with Jennings playing the part of the German poet. Jennings reads the poem out in German to his bohemian girlfriend who sits alongside him in the mysterious garret with its tall windows opening onto the night sky of an imagined Hamburg. The song lyrics are then read in English as we see shots of a street lamp, a German soldier and a woman standing in front of ominous spiked gates that appear ready to devour her as they are slowly closed. The film then explains how the music was composed in 1939 and that the original

singer of the song *Lili Marlene* was “a little Swedish girl” (although the original singer, Lale Andersen, was born and raised in Germany not Sweden). Jennings then shows us a singer and piano accompanist performing the song in a reconstructed Berlin nightclub, watched only by a cleaning woman who is scrubbing the floor. Jennings intercuts this scene with newsreel footage of Hitler and the German military to emphasise the notion that there is more than one way in which to represent the German nation. The first representation is a pre-war image of the revolutionary freedoms offered by the Weimar republic, the second is a representation of the right-wing militaristic Germany.

Next Jennings shows us how the song is picked up by the Nazi propaganda radio station in the early 1940s. It becomes an iconic song for the German troops across the occupied territories, eventually becoming the theme song of a German forces radio programme targeted at bringing messages from home to the frontline troops. A brief documentary sequence follows in which a BBC correspondent describes how the British soldiers on the North African front would gather around the glowing dial of the radio in the desert, listening to the song *Lili Marlene*. The correspondent then describes how the British soldiers were victorious in Africa, capturing prisoners, tanks and a song. Lale Andersen is then, in another fictional element of this supposedly true story, shown to be a prisoner in a German concentration camp. Although she was criticized for fraternizing with Jewish artists that she had met in Zurich, she was not imprisoned and the concentration camp scene is another element of the film’s fairy tale adaptation of reality. Then we are shown how, in an act of *détournage*, the song is reclaimed by the

victorious British Eighth Army soldiers. The lyrics are re-written in an attempt to undermine German nationalism, entreating the German people to hang Hitler from the lantern that features in the song's original lyrics.

The final sequence of the film is one of Jennings's most powerful fictional creations. It imagines the future of London after the war has been won. Unlike his later film, *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), there is a distinct element of celebration here in the notion that the war will soon be won. The camera tracks along a busy street market at night as a barrel organ plays the melody of *Lili Marlene*, past pyramids of apples, a huge poster of a baby's head and finally a horse-drawn cart appears in shot with a rotating drum full of children spinning on a portable fairground ride. This oneiric tracking shot appears to distill the techniques of Mass-Observation and reconstruction that feature in Jennings's previous films, putting them to use in delivering the final message of the film. This is expressed in the film's voiceover, arguing that we should use the song *Lili Marlene* as a reminder that we should "sweep fascism off the face of the Earth and to make it really – the last war". Although this may be one of the most overtly propagandist films that Jennings makes, it is not a jingoistic work, rather it expresses the links between Britain and Germany in its depiction of the ordinary soldiers on both sides carried along by events. The final sequence of the film emphasizes an anti-fascist, pacifist message and its optimistic finale is not only a precursor of the allied victory but also of the question as to what will follow victory. This is the question that Jennings addresses in his final masterwork *A Diary for Timothy* (1945).

Anderson places *A Diary for Timothy* alongside *Fires Were Started* as Jennings's masterpiece: "One's opinion as to which of them is Jennings' masterpiece is likely to vary according to which of them one has most recently seen." (Anderson 1954, p. 183). *A Diary for Timothy* was in production from the autumn of 1944 to the summer of 1945 and was released in 1946. From 1944 to 1945, Jennings worked on two other completed films as well as attempting to produce at least one other. The two finished films are 1944's *The 80 Days* (re-edited as *V1*, a shorter film with an alternative commentary for the American market) and *Myra Hess* (Jennings, 1945). *The 80 Days* is a short film concerning the effects of the German V1 flying bombs that were being used to target London and the South of England. *Myra Hess* is a documentary film, edited in time to the music, of a Beethoven recital performed by Dame Myra Hess, the pianist who features in *Listen to Britain* (Jennings & McAllister, 1942). Extracts from Jennings's *Myra Hess* documentary also appear in *A Diary for Timothy*.

*A Diary for Timothy* was conceived as a portrait of the last months of the Second World War. The film follows a child who was born in the final year of the war and the commentary explains to the child, through the film, what was happening in the wider world. Unlike Jennings's three films that I have discussed in more detail above (*Listen to Britain*, *Fires Were Started* and *The Silent Village*), *A Diary for Timothy* utilises a scripted commentary throughout. The commentary is written by E.M. Forster and spoken by Michael Redgrave. Although this use of a scripted voice-over may tie the film's meaning down, thereby avoiding the

uncertainty that is an important surrealist element of his other key works, it is a commentary that speculates: asking questions that lead to the film's mood of trepidation. Although the film attempts to deal with some of the issues that Jennings's earlier works address, it has neither the transcendent universality of *The Silent Village*'s uncanny depiction of the impending invasion nor the poetic sense of ambiguous beauty that *Listen to Britain*'s Mass-Observation collage form offers. In many ways, the film is retrograde, returning to Jennings's earlier works, borrowing techniques and individual shots and assembling them into a film essay. An essay that attempts to deliver a specific message concerning the challenges that lie ahead and one that interrogates the possible future direction of post-war British society. The lack of ambiguity in the film's scripted rhetoric returns us to his earlier work where he adopted a more expository style. Although described by Anderson in 1954 as one of Jennings's masterpieces (Anderson 1954, p. 183), the film has, over the intervening years, lost its emotive urgency. The issues that it deals with have become less relevant, leaving us with film that has less symbolic significance than the works discussed above.

*A Diary for Timothy* opens with a scene shot in the studios of the BBC Home Service, positioning the film in the historical context of the final year of World War Two. Forster's commentary addresses the newborn baby Timothy directly, attempting to confront social divisions in the suggestion that if he had been "born in a Liverpool or Glasgow slum this would be very different picture". The attempt to confront these divisions also reveals the assumptions of Forster's narration that implies a baby born in the slums wouldn't have "parents that take care of you" in

the same way that Timothy's middle class parents would do. As well as addressing Timothy, the film also follows the progress of the war and a series of characters, among them a farmer, a coal miner and an injured pilot. After introducing Timothy, the film illustrates the devastation wrought on Britain by the war. We are shown a group of three young boys walking along a street dwarfed by two towering piles of rubble on either side of the road. The visual strength of this shot is defused by the commentary's discussion of why we were fighting: in explaining this depiction of ruination we begin to lose the sense of impenetrable mystery that this image suggests. The subsequent introductory shots of the miner, farmer and pilot include further tracking shots that parallel the visuals of Jennings's previous films.

If we focus on the film's visual material we can see the development of Jennings's editing style as well as some lyrical pictorial compositions. There is a montage of shots that cuts between two families: the farmer's family watching home movies and an engine driver's sheltering from a flying bomb attack. When we hear bad news about the battle at Arnhem, Jennings repeats a shot from *The Silent Village* as the camera tracks into a large radio. There is a brief sequence when the commentary is absent and, in this musical sequence, Jennings's lyrical use of music and editing comes to the fore. We see and hear extracts from Dame Myra Hess's piano recital, there is a tracking shot across the audience and then Jennings repeats an audio extract from earlier in the film, mixing it with the piano music. The radio voice says "and they caught the water in their capes and drank that". He then cuts to a series of compositions depicting rain falling into tanks of



water or onto flat roofs in the centre of London. This brief poetic respite, along with some later picturesque shots of wets streets, frosty landscapes, fog and mannequins in shop windows, stands out as one of the few ambiguous moments amongst the continuing rhetorical commentary. There are some attempts to use juxtaposition ideologically, such as a cut from a child mining coal underground to the baby Timothy in his warm cot and another cut from Londoners sleeping underground to the baby sleeping in his pram but any radical political message in these comparisons is lost in the general flow of the film's commentary. The film hints at the important developments in workers' rights that have been instigated as part of the war effort and suggests the importance of continuing with these but overall the film's message is one of uncertainty as to the future direction of Britain and the British people. There are suggestions of solidarity with the Soviet Union including a sequence of a school choir singing a jolly song in front a large Soviet flag and a banner that reads "Greetings to the Red Army and the glorious fighting forces of the United Nations". The uncertain, liminal nature of British society at the end of the war is emphasized by the final lines of commentary that first question whether there will be a continued cycle of unemployment and war and end with the line "Are you going to have greed money or power, ousting decency from the world as they have in the past, or are you going to make the world a different place – you and the other babies?"

There is a subtle but substantive difference between the clearly articulated trepidation of *A Diary for Timothy* and the ambiguity of his earlier works such as *The Silent Village* and *The True Story of Lili Marlene*. Both of these earlier films

take on board aspects of surrealist thought as discussed above and they are both films that tell stories with a sense of mystery, exploring the dreams and neuroses of wartime Britain. *A Diary for Timothy* however operates more in the expository mode in its clear exposition of what happens in Britain in the final year of the war alongside some subtle use of composition and cutting between action on the home front and the frontline. The film asks questions and puts forward a tentative socialist argument using some complex audio-visual layering but it lacks the ambiguities that I have suggested demonstrate Jennings's relationship with surrealist ideas. In relation to Goudal's ideas regarding parallels between the languages of the dream and cinema, *A Diary for Timothy* does not foreground the visual and therefore does not allow illogicality to seep into the film's rhetorical framework. There are moments of lyrical reflection and attempts at ideological visual juxtapositions in the film but these are tied to a more literary form that develops from E.M. Forster's essay commentary. Jennings's final complete film, *Family Portrait* (1950) is also structured by a commentary that adopts the essay form. However, as the film's commentary is scripted by Jennings, there is more evidence in *Family Portrait* of Jennings's interests in the symbolic domain of Britain. In its parallels to Jennings's literary collage work *Pandæmonium* (1985), it is a film that relates more closely to his engagement with surrealism than the other films that he made after *The Silent Village*.

In the immediate postwar period Jennings was released from his obligations to work full-time as a filmmaker for the Crown Film Unit and began to develop a range of projects including proposals and treatments for a number of unrealized

fiction and documentary films. In the five years between the end of the war and the commencement of his final complete film, *Family Portrait* (1950), Jennings directed three short documentary films. He also began painting in earnest again, creating a substantial body of oil paintings in the period from 1946 – 1949, paintings that interrogated his particular British modernist iconography. These works were mainly executed in a style that closely resembles Cubism and included paintings of smoke, yachts, allotments, windmills, horses, ploughs and rural landscapes. Two of the films that he directed in this period, *A Defeated People* (1946) and *The Dim Little Island* (1948), concern the aftermath of the War, one looking at Germany and the other at Britain. The third film, *The Cumberland Story* (1947), tells the tale of a nineteenth century mining disaster.

*A Defeated People* is Jennings's first postwar film. In September 1945 he travelled to Germany to make a film about the defeated nation and the challenges of reconstruction. His impressions of the uncanny nature of the war-torn country appear to have overwhelmed him. In a letter home to his family, he writes "it is quite unlike anything one has been told or thought – both more alive and more dead" (Jackson 1993, p. 100). This notion brings us back to Foster's ideas of the "anxious ambiguity" (Foster 1993, p. 7) of the uncanny; developing as it does from a confusion between the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate. Jennings's film depicts the dereliction of German cities and the search for missing people. The soundtrack emphasizes this anxious ambiguity through the scripted commentary that includes lines such as "for children, the desolate landscape provides a dream playground". Jennings also experiments with the soundtrack in

two key sequences: one features a train announcer whose voice becomes a *musique concrete* composition and the other, an interrogation sequence, replaces the voices of German civilian and a British officer with the sound of an orchestral score's musical call and response. In its images of the gutted city of Berlin and its analysis of the relationship between the Nazis and the bourgeois industrialist Krupp family Jennings's film comments on the relationship between capitalism and war. The atmosphere of the film is informed by the paradoxes that Jennings encountered in the aftermath of the allied victory, he describes these in his letter home when he writes: "There is of course much too much to photograph – ugly and beautiful – life and death" (Jackson 1993, p. 100). These relationships thread through the film as a series of paradoxes that are used by Jennings to examine the nature of war.

*The Dim Little Island* is a short, ten minute, film that develops some of the speculations of *A Diary for Timothy* and prepares the ground for Jennings's final complete film *Family Portrait*. The opening credits outline that the film is "composed on some thoughts of our PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE from Four Men". The four men are the composer Ralph Vaughn Williams, the naturalist James Fisher, the industrialist John Ormston and the illustrator Osbert Lancaster. We can see Jennings attempting to combine the arts with the sciences to create a portrait of the country in the same way that he does in his later film *Family Portrait*. Lancaster opens the film and sets the tone by suggesting that he will challenge accepted representations of Britain. Jennings illustrates the commentary with some of Lancaster's comic drawings along with images that depict the

ambiguous beauty of the industrial landscape. When Lancaster suggests in his commentary that Britain may be perceived by some as a “dim little island”, we see an image of two men on the top of a huge chimney, shown in silhouette they are dwarfed by the chimney yet stand on its peak wielding pickaxes. This is a peculiar juxtaposition in which we not only search for meaning but also for human scale. Lancaster also ruminates on Ford Madox Brown’s painting *The Last of England* (1855), comparing historical perceptions of the Victorian era to the lived experience of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain. The painting and literature of this era underpins the development of social realism and the politics of British cinema. It is no accident that Derek Jarman’s lyrical depiction of 1980s Britain, *The Last of England* (1988), borrows the title of Madox Brown’s painting.

The following three commentators that feature in *The Dim Little Island* discuss the future of the British rural landscape, the musical heritage of Britain and the future of the shipping industry in Britain. Jennings uses footage from *Fires Were Started* along with shots of the rural and industrial landscape to illustrate the thoughts of the four men, ending the film with the line: “who can talk of an end when we’re scarcely at the beginning?” This concluding motif, though uncertain and ambiguous, appears to be a reference to Churchill’s wartime speech, *The End of the Beginning* (1942), suggesting that there is still much to be done in Britain to create the postwar society that the people of Britain either deserve or desire. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we continue to be stuck in this moment of searching for an end to the beginning: Britain remains a society where it seems impossible to reinvent the nation in a way that engages with revolutionary or republican ideals.

Jennings's final film, *Family Portrait* (1950) was made for the 1951 Festival of Britain as a portrait of the nation, and the film's main concern is the way in which art and science have shaped Britain. The coming of the machine age in the form of steel, coal and locomotives drive the narrative forward. In his final film we can see a working through of his interest in the history and landscape of Britain, his concern about a modernist future and the importance of combining these affinities in the synthesis of 'poetry and prose'. Surrealism may be considered as a modernist art movement but it also offers a critique of the stark rational objectivity of modernism as embodied in the architecture of the Bauhaus. Krauss explores how Adorno thinks of surrealism as "the underbelly of prewar technorationalism" (Krauss 1994, p. 34). Krauss considers surrealism as a metaphorical bay window that erupts from the "concrete flanks" (Krauss 1994, p. 34) of the new objectivity: a tumour on the streamlined architecture of modernism. The notion of confronting and synthesizing opposites such as these is at the heart of the surrealist enterprise and Breton outlines this when he writes in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*:

From the intellectual point of view, it was then, and still is today, a question of testing by any and all means, and of demonstrating at any price, the meretricious nature of the old antinomies hypocritically intended to prevent any unusual ferment on the part of man (Breton 1930, p. 123)

Jennings takes this notion on board and uses *Family Portrait* to explore the historical constructs that divide the world neatly into categories such as 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Victorian and modern, rational and poetic. In his final film, completed just prior to his sudden death in 1950, Jennings attempts to synthesise these oppositions. However, in doing so, he has been seen to embrace notions of nationalism and empire that have led to this work being dismissed as “a quiet end to a remarkable career” (Jackson 2010, p. 70). This opinion is often expressed in discussions of his post-war films that are “generally regarded as a critical disappointment” (Jennings 1985, p. xii). Lindsay Anderson, one of the key figures in the promotion of Jennings’s posthumous reputation, went even further in his criticism of Jennings’s final films, writing: “in the end they *can* be dismissed. In fact they must be.” (Anderson 1981, p. 95). Although the film is flawed, it should not be dismissed as it is a work that attempts to engage with the rational, mechanistic nature of the modern world through an imaginative reconstruction of the industrial revolution. In *Family Portrait* we can clearly see Jennings’s interest in the industrial revolution, its effect on the human consciousness and its importance to the development of the British nation. As part of a 1982 retrospective of Jennings’s work, David Mellor considered six moments in Jennings’s development towards becoming a key contributor to British modernism. *Family Portrait* belongs to Mellor’s sixth moment where “the Jennings-text, far from losing impetus, being beset by anxiety or losing direction (as is sometimes alleged), is constructed by a new series of meanings.” (Mellor 1982, p. 70).

*Family Portrait* departs from British documentary trope of the problem moment film exemplified by *Housing Problems* (1935). It does this in the way that it deals with the recent history of Britain, not as a problem, but as key to the creation of what George Orwell describes as “the English scene” (Orwell 1940, p. 13). *Family Portrait* evolved from Jennings’s much longer 1948 treatment for an unrealised film project entitled *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (Jennings 1948b) and in *Family Portrait*, he depicts the British Empire uncritically. This is not an untypical representation of empire as the documentary movement in Britain started as an adjunct of the Empire Marketing Board. This may appear a reactionary approach, a clear example of what Winston describes as the process of “running away from social meaning” (Winston 1995, p. 35). As Benjamin noted, the surrealists were the first to “uncover the revolutionary energies apparent in the antiquated” (Benjamin 1929, p. 148) and they explored the way “enslaved and enslaving things... flip suddenly into revolutionary nihilism” (Benjamin 1929, p. 148). Jennings’s approach is to attempt a re-imagination of Empire, paving the way for it flip, not into “revolutionary nihilism” (ibid), but rather into the more egalitarian form of the Commonwealth.

In *Family Portrait*, Jennings discusses the history of the British nation as if a unified organic family, moving swiftly from prehistory, through the Elizabethan age, dwelling on the industrial revolution, contemplating Britain’s future and attempting to sketch the nature of the British family’s personality. The film has a voice-over spoken by Michael Goodliffe that discusses the history and nature of the British nation. Through this scripted narration Jennings uses the relationship



between poetry and prose as a device to explore the connections between different elements of British social history, particularly the relationship between science (prose) and imagination (poetry). Jennings's thesis is explored through a series of paradoxes such as the following quote from the voice-over: "We adore innovations and love tradition".

*Family Portrait* opens with the Abram Games's modernist graphic emblem for the Festival of Britain and the subtitle "A film on the theme of The Festival of Britain 1951". The film purports to offer an opportunity for the past and the future to meet and discuss, it does not therefore attempt to offer a concise history of Britain, rather, a meditation on the British character. Jennings uses the relationship between poetry and prose as a metaphor to explore the historical development of the British nation and concludes that compromise is a defining feature of his imagined national family. *Family Portrait* can be seen as the closest Jennings comes to a cinematic interpretation of *Pandæmonium* (1985) with its focus on the importance of the industrial revolution to the shaping of modern Britain. We can see this frame of reference in the figures who inhabit the scripted voice-over: Over the twenty-two minutes of the film, twenty-seven names are mentioned and of these, over half (seventeen) were alive during Victoria's reign. There is only one woman in the list (Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>) and the remaining nine pre-date Victoria. There is no mention of the First World War and only oblique references to the Second World War.

If we consider *Family Portrait* in relation to Bill Nichols's documentary modes, we can see that the film distances itself from the observational or participatory modes that we might expect when Jennings the Mass-Observer and director of *Listen to Britain* is asked to produce a portrait of the nation. Rather than listening to Britain, we appear to be listening to Jennings. This expository approach is in part related to the way in which the soundtrack of the film was a compromise, with financial and time constraints changing the nature of the film's voice-over. Originally Jennings had planned to use three layers of voices: Firstly, an official "voice of the festival" (quoted in Jackson 1993, p. 163) narrator; secondly a voice representing the "average man" (ibid); thirdly, Jennings intended to include archive and reconstructed recordings of historical characters. The voice-over used in the completed film is a single actor's voice that doesn't give the sound collage impression originally intended. As we follow the communications between Jennings and Grierson at the Central Office of Information (quoted in Jackson 1993, pp. 162 - 172), we can begin to see the act of filmmaking becomes the compromise referred to in the text. Jennings is fulfilling a brief, working on a state-sponsored project and smuggling his own relatively obtuse and personal frames of reference into a film that is to be seen by hundreds of thousands of "average" (ibid) men at the Festival of Britain.

Brian Winston has argued that the entire enterprise of the British documentary movement under Grierson was "about getting films made, being film-makers – nothing else" (Winston 1995, p. 59). We can see this in the way that Jennings turns his Festival of Britain film into a personal reflection on the nature of

Britishness. The film has clearly developed from Jennings's earlier, and much longer treatment, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, which opens with the following note:

This treatment is not concerned with history – with what happened - as such. It is concerned with our motives, our feelings, our performance. [...] We have only learnt in part and only survived in part – but confronted with the performance of other families ours is worth talking about. (Jennings 1948b)

The mythopoeic nature of Jennings's script for *Family Portrait* raises historical characters such as the inventor (Watt) and the ironmaster (Wilkinson) to the role of mythical figures in an imagined national family, using them to illustrate his own poetic notions about the relationship between science and the arts. He doesn't attempt to directly address social problems, in favour of briefly and obliquely referencing issues such as social housing. This can be seen in lines from the commentary such as: "One part of us lost sight of the other... rifts in the family we're still having to repair."

If we only consider the content of the voice-over script, the film seems rather conservative and staid. For example, Jennings mentions the experiments of Sir John Bennett Lawes at Broadbalk Fields in 1843 that led to the development of chemical fertilisers. In Jennings's simplistic formulation, "the family was hungry" due to urban overpopulation and the patrician Baronet uses his intellect to devise a solution. We can see why Andrew Britton, one of the few writers to criticise Jennings wrote:

...if Jennings is completely incapable of formulating any progressive social aim or project that is because he is imaginatively complicit in the very ideologies which such a project would be obliged to contest (Britton 1989, p. 41)

Britton argues that, although Jennings held left-wing views, he failed to disengage himself from or offer alternatives to the class-based structures of British society. Britton's argument is wider than this and sees Jennings as indicative of "the drastic ideological limitations of Labourism" (Britton 1989, p. 41). We should balance these negative assertions with the argument that Jennings believes in the idea of the British family working together and in the utopian elements of the film; he attempts to encompass and contain the feeling of unity that supposedly existed in Britain during the Second World War, looking to the future with a guarded optimism.

If the film's script and soundtrack were compromised by financial constraints and interference from Grierson, perhaps we should examine the visuals in order to explore the nature of *Family Portrait*. Jennings draws on his knowledge of visual language to compose shots that represent the history of British art. Some of the most powerfully affective images are the rather prosaic images of the everyday (in the vein of surrealist *image trouvée* or found image) such as a shot of a shop window and the surrealist juxtapositions such as one of a huge gasometer looming over a cricket pitch. Although these compositions parallel the work of modernist photographers and filmmakers, the images also have affinities with earlier

Victorian photographers and further compositions seem to be closer to the work of Turner or the impressionists. Jennings's selection and combination of images for poetic and emotional affect support his assertion in the first draft of the treatment that the visuals were the most important element of the film.

Of course, the less commentary in general, the better. I am therefore in process of replacing the sentiments expressed in this Treatment by visuals which, in the end, are the real material of the film. (Jennings 1949, p. 2)

As mentioned above in relation to Goudal's essay (1978), this emphasis on the visual is one of the three keys to understanding the connection between the language of cinema and the language of the dream. There is a dreamlike quality to the visuals which would have been emphasised by Jennings's intended collage soundtrack.

Jennings's film suggests that compromise is a defining feature of the British temperament. In his argument it is the synthesis of poetry and prose that defines Britain as a nation. His emphasis on this and the tracing of affinities between the past and the present sees Jennings looking back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a model to be re-imagined rather than forward to a revolutionary modern future that breaks with the past. Jennings seems more comfortable in representing the coal miners and ironworkers as masters of the crafts that have facilitated the strength of a British Empire rather than alienated or exploited workers in William Blake's "dark satanic mills" (c. 1808), or in the 19<sup>th</sup> century world of William Morris's *Dream of John Ball* (1888). There is a parallel here in the way that both Morris

and Jennings appear to look nostalgically back to an earlier age, raising concerns about the future, concerns that Jennings directly addressed in his earlier work *Diary for Timothy* (1946). Robins & Webster disagree with the notion that either Jennings's or Morris's approaches were nostalgic, stressing their utopian awareness of a "power to come" (Robins & Webster 1999, p. 15). This reimagining of the Victorian age is a way in which we can read the film as engaging with surrealist ideas.

In *Family Portrait*, Jennings suggests that the most distinctive feature of British society and, by implication, British surrealism is this acceptance of compromise and the accompanying lack of revolutionary fervour. Remy sees one of the distinctive features of British Surrealism as its lack of any sustained collective activity, suggesting that this is "Inherent in the British individualistic diffidence towards ideologies and the formation of closely knit groups." (Remy 1999, p. 21). *Family portrait* itself avoids depicting a specific vision of British society, reflecting instead the dialectical nature of the interaction between different social structure through the metaphorical use of the terms poetry and prose. Although the film itself appears to be a compromise, slightly less certain and assured, lacking the urgency of Jennings's wartime films, it is a rather clear portrait of Jennings – the man who didn't quite fit in, the polymath who couldn't find a place, the poet of British documentary cinema with a deep interest in the effects of the industrial revolution. Perhaps Jennings recognised the industrial revolution as a particularly British one: As a focal point of the film, it allows him to trace affinities between the intellectual discoveries of Victorian scientists, artists and

engineers and transpose them onto the modern British world of the 1950s; where aircraft manufacture becomes part of the natural flow of the history of a nation rather than a radically new form of experience.

Paradoxically we find that, although Jennings was a key member of the British branch of one of the most revolutionary of 20<sup>th</sup> Century art movements, we find *Family Portrait* responding to modernism with an almost “nostalgic myth of a pre-modern paradise lost” (Berman 1983, p. 15). Rather than grasp the violent revolutionary nature of André Breton’s Parisian surrealism, Jennings’s final film reacts against modernism, absorbing it into a set of personal symbols that transcend time. The mirror, that recurring motif of surrealism, no longer reflects the subconscious of a desire unbound. For Jennings it becomes a magic mirror that guides a nation state to victory in conquest. Jennings’s final film has been criticised for this inherent nationalism but we should consider it in relation to Victor Burgin’s description of cinema in *The Remembered Film* (Burgin 2004). Burgin argues that, in viewing a film such as *Family Portrait* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not a heterogeneous object but a series of small syntagms, “typical of the reiterative fractional chains that form unconscious fantasies.” (Burgin 2004, p. 14). This idea returns us to the notion of “synthetic criticism” (Hammond 1978, p. 5) that Hammond delineates and that is discussed above.

Like his more lauded works, *Family Portrait* contains a number of sequence-images that rise above the anodyne commentary and point us towards the “text images” in Jennings’s *Pandæmonium*, the collage of writings in which his

response to the industrial revolution is more clearly articulated. In *Family Portrait* Jennings claims the Victorian era as the midpoint of a historical continuum, attempting to trace a British modernist trajectory that develops through figures such as William Morris and William Cobbett. In *Family Portrait* and *Pandæmonium* we can see Breton's call for a revolutionary synthesis being applied to an analysis of the history of Britain in which the antinomies of Victorian and Modern thought are tested through the combination of poetry and prose. Jennings's film and the Festival of Britain for which it was made in some ways exemplify British modernism as a retro-surrealist enterprise. Like Krauss's conception of surrealism, the British interpretation of Modernism connects us "through the irrational, with the other side of progress, with its flotsam, its discards, its rejects. Progress as obsolescence" (Krauss 1994, p. 34). Jennings's vision of Britain expressed through his films, writings and paintings is, at its heart, a surrealist interpretation of history, nation and *Genius Loci*.



## Conclusion

This thesis is an investigation of the films of Humphrey Jennings and their relationship to surrealism. It examines how his films relate to surrealism's set of ideas as they are manifest in a particular historical and national context. Although much has been written about Humphrey Jennings in relation to the British documentary tradition, very little work has considered Jennings's body of films in relation to surrealism. Richardson has clearly engaged with the international surrealist movement through "a degree of ethnographic involvement" (Richardson 2006, p. 14) and considers the full range of surrealist responses to cinema. In his brief discussion of Jennings's work (that runs to just one page), he argues that, though Jennings appears to be a "more engaged surrealist than [...] even Buñuel" (Richardson 2006, p. 86), his films "pull in different directions and at times even seem to working against a surrealist perspective" (ibid.). This thesis takes Richardson's argument that surrealism is "not a negligible factor" (ibid.) in Jennings's films, and explores how and to what extent surrealism is evident in all of Jennings's films from *Post Haste* (1934) to *Family Portrait* (1950). This detailed analysis of how Jennings's films may be read through surrealism is lacking in more extensive studies of Jennings such as those by Logan (2011), Beattie (2010) and Jackson (2004). Their books are important studies of Jennings, taking clear biographical and historical approaches. The relationship between Jennings's films and surrealism is an element of their discussion but is not the focus and this thesis is the first attempt to systematically consider all of Jennings's films in relation to surrealism. This has been carried out through detailed analyses

of Jennings's films, particularly relating his works to surrealism in terms of the everyday, the sublime and the uncanny.

The main arguments of this thesis are: Firstly that surrealism in Britain can be defined by the three paradoxes that are delineated in the second chapter. Although surrealism in Britain lacks the focus of the Parisian or Prague groups, it remains a strange aura that haunts the art and films of Britain. It is an aura that this work attempts to define through these three paradoxes and also through the themes and ideas that thread through Jennings's work. Secondly, the thesis contends that Jennings's films can be divided into three active phases, each phase culminating in a key film. It is acknowledged that *Spare Time* (1939) and *Listen to Britain* (1942) are key films in Jennings's oeuvre. The ways in which surrealism is evident in these two films is considered, firstly through the use of Mass-Observation in *Spare Time* and secondly through the ways in which *Listen to Britain* explores the everyday and the sublime. The thesis also examines the importance of a third, previously generally overlooked, film, *The Silent Village* (1943), as one of the most important of Jennings's films, particularly in the way that it articulates the relationship between surrealism and the uncanny. These explorations of Jennings's films lead me on to the third main argument, one that threads through all three main sections of the thesis: that there is a specifically British form of surrealism that has developed from the historical situation of Britain in the period from 1936 to 1946 – one that draws from the national identity of Britain. The symbolic domain of British surrealism and its praxis can be read in the films of Jennings and the auratic traces of Jennings's films thread

through the work of subsequent filmmakers. This trace of Jennings, and the symbolism of what I have called the communicating village, is an area that demands future exploration in areas that are suggested below.

That Jennings's body of work is important in relation to the history of British documentary filmmaking is clear. His reputation has grown to equal that of John Grierson, particularly in his development of a poetic, lyrical style of documentary production. The importance of his work is often related to the way that his films go against the conventional style of institutional documentary filmmaking; the argument being that "Jennings' symphonic, allusive approach gave documentary its only stylistic advance in a decade of endeavour increasingly marked by the atrophying of the imagination." (Brown 2007, p. 34). Lindsay Anderson's oft-quoted remark that "Jennings is the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced" (Anderson 1954, p. 181) may be couched in the past tense but Jennings's influence can be felt in the work of Anderson and his contemporaries of the British New Wave in the 1960s and 70s. In the 1980s, Jennings's work appears to continue to be evident in the work of independent filmmakers; Mick Eaton discusses Jennings's films in 1982 concluding that "the legacy of such work is very evident in independent film-making today" (Eaton 1982, p. 84). The influence of Jennings has also been discussed in relation to films of the 1990s; Thomson argues that what *The Long Day Closes* (1992) "really comes from is Humphrey Jennings and *Listen to Britain*" (Thomson 2007, p. 39). Filmmakers themselves have spoken in interviews of the importance of Jennings to British cinema: Mike Leigh says that *Listen to Britain* (1942) is "an exemplary piece of

film storytelling for us all” (quoted in *Humphrey Jennings*, Macdonald, 2000) and Richard Attenborough has asserted that Jennings was “responsible for bringing British cinema, in terms of acting, into the contemporary world.” (quoted in *Humphrey Jennings*, Macdonald, 2000).

Despite the importance of Humphrey Jennings to British cinema, much of the discussion relating to Jennings’s influence on subsequent filmmakers tends towards the anecdotal and general. This is also true of much writing on Surrealism and British national cinema. In what may be “the first discussion of the topic” (Spicer 2007, p. 103), Andrew Spicer explores surrealism as an “alternative tradition in British cinema” (Spicer 2007, p. 103), briefly examining the surrealist influences on three popular genres (horror, comedy and romance). This thesis suggests that the work of Jennings, in particular his relationship to surrealism, can be read in the work of subsequent filmmakers. This reading of Jennings through surrealism opens up a broad spectrum of areas for possible future investigation into surrealism and British cinema. Jennings’s surrealist concerns are exhibited in a wide range of British films and his tropes of Mass-Observation, the everyday and the uncanny symbolic domain of the village return in British films from the 1950s until the present day.

There are four aspects of Jennings’s engagement with surrealism that can be delineated in the work of subsequent filmmakers. Firstly, there is his involvement in the establishment of the Mass-Observation organization which can be read in his “allusive approach” (Brown 2007, p. 34) to documentary filmmaking. As

discussed above, although the Mass-Observation movement is not a surrealist organization, the idea of research through Mass-Observation has clear parallels to surrealist concerns with the everyday. This approach to exploring the quotidian is not evident in the works of the majority of films produced by the British documentary film movement of the 1930s and 1940s, works that tend to use the expository mode in order to deliver messages of quasi-propaganda. Jennings's films discussed above tend to utilise an alternative, impressionistic approach that foregrounds the uncertainty of meaning in representations of the everyday. This approach can be seen in the work of Jennings's acolytes such as Lindsay Anderson whose early film *O Dreamland* (1953) clearly develops from Jennings's allusive observational approach. *Oh Dreamland* is a portrait of a funfair in Margate, shot without accompanying voice-over and using mainly hand-held camera work. The film features some of the uncanny elements discussed above in relation to *The Silent Village* (1943). *O Dreamland* includes a number of fairground automatons as well as references to the macabre aspects of the funfair such as an exhibition of "Torture Through the Ages". The soundtrack features field recordings of cackling laughter and sound effects from these mechanized displays and the overall effect gives the funfair a sinister, uncanny and somewhat melancholy ambience that is at odds with the supposed pleasurable function of Anderson's *Dreamland*. The exploration of these border regions where observational realism meets the carnivalesque is a feature of Anderson's film work and one area for future examination is an exploration of how this concoction of realism and *grand guignol* is elaborated in his later films such as *If...* (1968), *O Lucky Man* (1973) and *Britannia Hospital* (1982).

The second aspect of Jennings's work that offers areas for future analysis is his exploration of the symbolic domain of British culture. As discussed above, surrealism is an international movement with distinct national groupings and surrealism in Britain is manifest in a range of practices over a long period of time. Jennings's attempts to delineate the "revolutionary energies apparent in the antiquated" (Benjamin 1929, p. 148) through his *Pandæmonium* (1985) project, lead him to explore surrealism through the symbolism of the village. David Gladwell's *Requiem for a Village* (1975) is perhaps the clearest example of a subsequent British film that relates to with Jennings's concerns with surrealism and the symbolic domain of the village. Gladwells' film depicts elements of the contemporary rural in the work of the farmer, the wheelwright and the blacksmith but slips effortlessly from the past to the present. Like Jennings, he explores the timeless nature of the village whilst expressing his concerns regarding the future of rural Britain. *Requiem for a Village* utilises ordinary people in an imagined reconstruction of the past life of the village and articulates this through a musical, symphonic approach that parallels techniques used in a number of Jennings's films discussed above. The film combines documentary with scripted sequences and reconstruction whilst engaging with the uncanny through the symbolism of the village. There are scenes of supernatural resurrection at the opening and closing of the film where tombs open and fall to the ground as the people of the village are resurrected, shot in slow-motion. As in Jennings's *Fires Were Started* (1943), the film's narrative is resolved by a seemingly inevitable sacrifice: the character who appears in the opening sequence is killed by a faceless dark force

(in this case the angels of death are motorcyclists). *Requiem for a Village* can be considered as a film that links Jennings to the pulp horror films of 1970s Britain where the village is a place of tradition imbued with mystery, uncertainty and the uncanny. Films such as *Psychomania* (1973) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) explore regions where the contemporary meets the past and where this conjunction is figured through the uncanny domain of the village.

The third aspect of Jennings's work that offers opportunities to explore the relationships between surrealism and British cinema is his use of reconstruction to explore traumatic events. There are a number of films that occupy the same territory as Jennings's *The Silent Village* in the way that they explore contemporary events through a speculative reconstruction of history. The clearest parallel to Jennings's film is Brownlow and Mollo's *It Happened Here* (1965), a film that depicts Britain under the control of a Nazi government following an imagined defeat early in the Second World War. Brownlow and Mollo also explore ideas that parallel Jennings's work in *Winstanley* (1975), a film that tells the story of Gerrard Winstanley's attempt to establish a socialist commune during the time of Oliver Cromwell. Bill Douglas's film *Comrades* (1986) is perhaps even closer to Jennings in the way that it explores the period around the industrial revolution, its effects on the traditions of the village and the human imagination. Douglas uses the pseudo-mythical figure of the travelling magic lanternist in order to tell the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in a way that approaches the ideas of Jennings's *Pandæmonium* (1985) discussed above. The influences of the speculative fiction of *The Silent Village* can be read again in the uncanny

resonances of the films of Peter Watkins such as *The War Game* (Watkins, 1965), which is an exploration of the possible effects of a nuclear war on Britain shot in a documentary style, or in Mick Jackson's *Threads* (1984), a film that covers similar ground.

The fourth aspect of Jennings's work that offers avenues for further exploration is the connection between the poetic lyricism of his documentary work and the films of the British avant-garde. A number of subsequent directors have explored similar territory using parallel approaches but perhaps the clearest successor to Jennings is Patrick Keiller. Keiller's Robinson trilogy – *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) – take on board and expand many of Jennings's techniques and notions in order to explore contemporary Britain. Keiller's films depict the landscape of Britain as explored by “a wandering erratic scholar” (Keiller 2012, p. 3) in a way that synthesises and extends Jennings's lyrical approach to film making. I have explored Jennings's broad interests and how these fed into his work through the prism of surrealism. Further explorations might involve an exploration of Keiller's work in relation to the way surrealism in Britain threads through a broad body of film, literature and art. We can see this in the work of Iain Sinclair and Chris Petit, their relation to the writings of J.G. Ballard and the place of Britain in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century globalised world. Like Jennings before them, Keiller and Sinclair take a mythopoeic approach to everyday life where “the writer is a *chronographer*, hungry for place as expressively potent, place as experience...as a trigger to memory, imagination, and mythic presence” (Cunningham 2009). Sinclair's approach to creative practice deals with the non-



places of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century whilst being informed by the “particularities of place” (Cunningham 2009). This approach is evident in Petit and Sinclair’s film *London Orbital* (2002) and also in the work Gideon Köppel whose film *Sleep Furiously* (2008) explores similar territory to Jennings’s *The Silent Village* as it reflects on the rural communities of Wales through a case study of a particular community in Ceredigion where he grew up – a place whose life is under threat as the local school and the village facilities are being closed down.

In this thesis rather than describe Jennings’s films as surrealist texts, I have examined how his films can be read through surrealism. This is the first attempt to consider in detail the surrealism of Jennings’s oeuvre and is significant in that the elements of Jennings’s work that are cited as being influential on subsequent filmmakers - such as “Jennings’ aesthetic originality” (Corner 2008, p. 15) or his “deeply nebulous” (Bruzzi 2000, p. 100) approach to narrative - are those that relate closely to his engagement with surrealist thought.

As discussed above, surrealism in Britain is rooted in the rural and in the uncanny effects of the machine age as embodied by Jennings’s *Pandæmonium* (1985) project. This is evident in his consideration of both the revolutionary potential of the outmoded and the ways in which the development of modern society impacted on the collective imagination in Britain. In concluding this thesis I should attempt to summarise the nature of the titular communicating village by reiterating a few themes from across the text. This term is used in order to articulate the way in which Jennings approaches the “infinite freedom” (Jennings, 1936b, p. 220) of

surrealism, the ways in which he expresses its immanence by suggesting that it is embedded in the quotidian. For Jennings, born in Walberswick on the Suffolk coast, the village life of England is at the heart of his semantic domain and he translates this symbolic knowledge into the situations in which he finds himself. The Jennings village is a spectre that hovers through his films: In early works leading up to *Spare Time* (1939) the communicating village can be seen in representations of rural and industrial life. It is there in the relationship between the outmoded schooners and the coastal village of *Farewell Topsails* (1937). It is also evident in Jennings's use of pastoral symbolism in films such as *The Farm* (1938), where he articulates a series of rural archetypes that operate as a "conduction wire" (Breton, 1932, p. 80) between the rural and the industrial. Like surrealism itself, Jennings's village can appear "anywhere, anytime, to anyone" (Jennings, 1936b, p. 220). In *Spare Time* (1939), Jennings transposes the notion of the village onto the lived reality of industrial Britain, examining how the human imagination responds to industrialisation. As war approaches and commences, the mythopoeic elements of Jennings's village are used to stitch together the rural, urban and industrial, this approach reaches its high point in *Listen to Britain's* (1942) symphonic approach. In *The Silent Village* (1943), Jennings returns to the rural village examining the effects of industrialisation, war and invasion. The uncanny resonances of these historical events – both past and possible future – flow through the spirit of place.

The village appears as a phantom in Jennings's work, as both the return of a repressed desire to inhabit a community and an exploration of how the village

inhabits us. We can see these same concerns inscribed in the works of British surrealists such as the way in which Anthony Earnshaw imagines a phantom village in his plan to place a cottage in Leeds City centre (Earnshaw, 2011). It is a motif that underpins much of J. G. Ballard's fiction, where the recurring locus of suburbia becomes Ballard's domain, the border zone where a new village erupts. In his novel *High-Rise* (1975) for example, as contemporary society breaks down within the hierarchical confines of a modern tower block, the residents realise that "Their faces and voices were reassuringly familiar. In a sense [...] they constituted the members of a village" (Ballard 1975, p. 36).

If, as Lovell asserts, "British documentary is our art cinema" (Lovell 1972, p. 2) then the Jennings village is the "bay window with its scrollwork cornices" (Krauss 1994, p. 34) on Britain's art cinema: a body of films that allows the work of subsequent filmmakers in a range of forms and genres to be read through surrealism. Humphrey Jennings's work is immanent to the field of British cinema, is rooted in documentary, surrealism and the symbolic domain of the village. Jennings's village communicates to us through these works that are at once outmoded and revolutionary. This reading of Jennings's work through surrealism offers a model through which we can approach the work of subsequent filmmakers allowing us to read a specific British surrealism in the cinema of Britain. The communicating village is not merely a set of archetypal rural symbols; it is rather an expression of community, individuality and the revolutionary potential of the outmoded in the context British surrealism.



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## Filmography

- À propos de Nice* (1930) dir. Jean Vigo, France.
- A Defeated People* (1946) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- A Diary for Timothy* (1946) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, UK.
- Barque Sortant du Port* (1895) dir. Louis Lumière, France.
- Britannia Hospital* (1982) dir. Lindsay Anderson, UK.
- Chelovek S Kinoapparatomto* (1929) dir. Dziga Vertov, USSR.
- Coal Face* (1935) dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, UK.
- Comrades* (1986) dir. Bill Douglas, UK.
- Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) dir. Directed by Robert Wiene, Germany.
- Defence of Madrid* (1936) dir. Ivor Montagu & Norman McLaren, Czech Republic.
- Diary for Timothy* (1945) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (1927) dir. Directed by Walter Ruttmann, Germany.
- Drifters* (1929) dir. John Grierson, UK.
- English Harvest* (1938) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- Family Portrait* (1950) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- Fantômas* (1913-1914) dir. Louis Feuillade, France.
- Farewell Topsails* (1937) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- Fires Were Started* (1943) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.
- Heart of Britain* (1970) dir. Robert Vas, UK.
- Housing Problems* (1935) dir. Arthur Elton & E Anstey, UK.
- Humphrey Jennings: the Man Who Listened to Britain* (2000) dir. Kevin Macdonald, UK.
- If...* (1968) dir. Lindsay Anderson, UK.

*In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914) dir. Edward Sheriff Curtis, USA.

*It Happened Here* (1965) dir. Kevin Brownlow & Andrew Mollo, UK.

*Las Hurdes* (1933) dir. Luis Buñuel, Spain.

*Listen to Britain* (1942) dir. Humphrey Jennings & Stewart McAllister, UK.

*Living on the Edge* (1987) dir. Michael Grisby, UK.

*Locomotives* (1934) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*London Can Take It!* (1940) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*London Orbital* (2002) dir. Chris Petit & Iain Sinclair, UK.

*London* (1994) dir. Patrick Keiller, UK.

*Making Fashion* (1938) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Moana* (1926) dir. Robert Flaherty, USA.

*Myra Hess* (1945) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Nanook of the North* (1922) dir. Robert Flaherty, USA.

*Night Mail* (1936) dir. Harry Watt & Basil Wright, UK.

*O Dreamland* (1953) dir. Lindsay Anderson, UK.

*O Lucky Man!* (1973) dir. Lindsay Anderson, UK.

*Of Time and the City* (2008) dir. Terence Davies, UK.

*Ordinary People* (1941) dir. Jack Lee & J.B. Homes, UK.

*Penny Journey* (1938) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Pett and Pott* (1934) dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, UK.

*Post Haste* (1934) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Psychomania* (1973) dir. Don Sharp, UK.

*Requiem for a Village* (1975) dir. David Gladwell, UK.

*Rien que les heures* (1926) dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, France.

*Robinson in Ruins* (2010) dir. Patrick Keiller, UK.

*Robinson in Space* (1997) dir. Patrick Keiller, UK.



*Romance Sentimentale* (1930) dir. Sergei Eisenstein, France.

*S.S. Ionian* (1939) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) dir. Karel Reisz, UK.

*Shoah* (1985) dir. Claude Lanzmann, USA.

*Sleep Furiously* (2008) dir. Gideon Köppel, UK.

*Spare Time* (1939) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Speaking From America* (1938) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Spring Offensive* (1940) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Target for Tonight* (1941) dir. Harry Watt, UK.

*The 80 Days* (1944) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Birth of the Robot* (1935) dir. Len Lye, UK.

*The Cumberland Story* (1947) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Dim Little Island* (1948) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Farm* (1938) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The First Days* (1939) dir. Humphrey Jennings, Harry Watt & Pat Jackson, UK.

*The Heart of Britain* (1941) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Last of England* (1988) dir. Derek Jarman, UK.

*The Long Day Closes* (1992) dir. Terence Davies, UK.

*The Phantom Museum: Random Forays Into the Vaults of Sir Henry Wellcome's Medical Collection* (2003) dir. Stephen Quay & Timothy Quay, UK.

*The Red Shoes* (1948) dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, UK.

*The Silent Village* (1943) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Sky's the Limit* (1943) dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, UK.

*The Song of Ceylon* (1935) dir. Basil Wright, UK.

*The Story of the Wheel* (1934) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The Thin Blue Line* (1988) dir. Errol Morris, USA.

*The True Story of Lili Marlene* (1944) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*The War Game* (1965) dir. Peter Watkins, UK.

*The Wicker Man* (1973) dir. Robin Hardy, UK.

*This Unnameable Little Broom* (1985) dir. Stephen Quay & Timothy Quay, UK.

*Threads* (1984) dir. Mick Jackson, UK.

*Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) dir. Alain Resnais, France.

*Triumph des Willens* (1934) dir. Leni Riefenstahl, Germany.

*Un Chien Andalou* (1929) dir. Luis Buñuel, France.

*VI* (1944) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Welfare of the Workers* (1940) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*Went the Day Well?* (1942) dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, UK.

*Winstanley* (1975) dir. Kevin Brownlow & Andrew Mallow, UK.

*Words for Battle* (1941) dir. Humphrey Jennings, UK.

*World Trade Center* (2006) dir. Oliver Stone, UK.